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Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys some of the ways in which certain representative feminists from each of the Abrahamic religions have argued that patriarchal religious traditions have systematically excluded women from contributing to traditionally accepted interpretations of their sacred texts. It shows how, in response to this exclusion, feminist theologians from each of these religions have observed a need to interpret the scriptures of their traditions from the standpoint provided by their own experience as women—thus offering new interpretations which they perceive to constitute a powerful tool with which to mount a critique of the theological traditions that had excluded them. The article concludes that, as women achieve greater opportunities for assessing their sacred texts themselves, this will have a growing effect on how the texts are read, on the religious institutions that claim to be justified by them and on the core religious concepts, such as ‘God’, that lie at the heart of those texts, whether their tradition be Jewish, Christian or Islamic.

Keywords: Feminist interpretation, Scriptures, Judaism, Christianity, Islam

I

The confrontation between the ideas of modern women and the beliefs and practises of traditional Judaism, Christianity and Islam has not, for the most part, been experienced as a challenge coming from outside each tradition. Rather, the challenge has come from within, as Jewish, Christian and Muslim women have become increasingly conscious of what they perceive as sexism within their respective traditions. And because this challenge comes from within, it is perhaps the most difficult one for traditionally inclined religious adherents to ignore. Moreover, modern women challenge traditional religions on a number of fronts, which penetrate deeply into all aspects of those religions: time-
honoured interpretations of important scriptural texts have not been left undisturbed; religious institutions, laws, customs and practises have been critically analysed; and even the concept ‘God’ has been probed, stretched, and, in some cases, rejected.

This assault on traditional religion gathered pace and momentum as it swept through Europe and North America during the twentieth century. The first signs, however, that the challenge of women to traditional religion was set to become a mass movement are seen at the close of the nineteenth century in the work of the North American feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage, who foresaw that the coming conflict between male and female within the Church would ‘shatter the foundations of religious belief’. Today, we can easily see that no religion has escaped the impact of the increased public prominence and empowerment of women, with religious doctrines nowadays being routinely blamed for promoting derogatory views of women. For in seeking the same social recognition, economic opportunities and political rights as men typically enjoy, women have often found that the greatest stumbling blocks are established religious traditions and the seemingly misogynist religious anthropologies upon which they are premised.

Increased access to education in the twentieth century undoubtedly helped many women to identify what they took to be a systematic link between their social, economic and political oppression, on the one hand, and the way that they were de-valued by traditional religion, on the other. Many women came to perceive the extent to which religious views had been, and continued to be, shaped by what they came to identify as patriarchy. Moreover, certain religious views clearly exacerbated women’s inequality with men. Women responded to their growing awareness of this in different ways. But one response was to analyse their religious traditions from the various perspectives offered by the feminist movement. Women scrutinized the origins and development of their religious traditions, and examined the role of these traditions in underpinning the state legislation that institutionalized the oppression of women. Examples of such legislation are the property laws in Europe which, until the twentieth century, forbade married women to own property, or the Islamic divorce laws which, in many Muslim countries even today, make it much easier for a man to divorce

1. A similar movement was simultaneously gathering force in much of the Arab world, particularly in Egypt and Turkey. For some of the core texts of the Arab feminist movement, see Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (eds.), Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing (London: Virago Press, 1992).

a woman than it is for a woman to divorce a man. In both cases, this discriminatory legislation can be traced back to the derogatory views of women that have been sanctioned by religion.

II

Matilda Joslyn Gage is a neglected figure in women’s studies in religion. This is particularly surprising given that she was a groundbreaking figure, not only because she campaigned for women’s equality with men in public life but also because she exposed a systematic link between women’s social, economic and political oppression and traditional Christianity—the faith which had dominated her culture. She saw clearly that many of the features of public life that women found oppressive—the laws regarding inheritance, marriage, or birth control, for example—stemmed from Christian beliefs. Recognizing that these beliefs had evolved through the centuries, she argued that in many cases their evolution had been manipulated by men for their benefit as opposed to that of women. Moreover, Gage was convinced that some of the central doctrines of Christianity were directly responsible for the persecution and oppression of women in the Christian era. Indeed, Gage’s seminal importance lies in her explicitly linking this oppression to the direct influence of Christian beliefs—particularly the belief that women were not created equal to men.

Interestingly, despite her attempt at a devastating exposure of sexism, patriarchy and androcentricity within Christianity, Gage did not regard herself as opposed to religion. Rather, she declared herself to be opposed to the usurpation of Christianity by those men who had deployed certain religious beliefs in order to further their own interests. She clearly believed that if purged of male distortions, Christianity could regain its original value. Consequently, she remained a committed Presbyterian; respecting what she called ‘true religion’ as opposed to ‘theology’.3 In this continued allegiance to her religious tradition, she broke a path that has been followed by many subsequent religious feminists.

Gage argues that what she regards as the negative view of marriage promoted by traditional Christianity was combined with the view that woman not only was created inferior to man but also was ultimately responsible for the Fall. According to traditional Christian doctrine, because of one woman’s purported role in the Fall, all women are in the process of undergoing God’s punishment. One aspect of this supposed punishment is the pain of childbirth; the other is marriage, where each

3. Gage, Women, Church and State, p. 11.
woman is subjected to a man, whose task it is to punish her for her responsibility for the Fall.4

Moreover, an ‘explanation’ is provided in the book of Genesis for why it was the woman, and not the man, who first succumbed to temptation. This purported explanation is to be found in one account of the creation of Adam and Eve, where Eve is portrayed as derived from one of Adam’s ribs.5 Each of the Abrahamic traditions has developed this legend, reinforcing the impression it gives of woman having been created inferior to man. Muslim tradition, for example, ascribes to Muhammad the following saying: ‘Be friendly to women for woman-kind was created from a rib, but the bent part of the rib, high up, if you try to straighten it you will break it; if you do nothing, she will continue to be bent’.6

This version of the creation myth has long been taken to imply that, as woman was created out of man, she must be inferior to him. Furthermore, the rest of the story underscores the idea that woman was created in order to fulfil a need in man: namely, to be his helper and his wife. Gage was perhaps the first to observe that the important role ascribed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition to the creation myth is responsible for the widespread perception that the human race can be neatly divided into two groups along gender lines, and that one group is innately inferior to the other.

Although one cannot hold later religious thinkers responsible for the presence of such passages in their sacred writings, one can, as Gage chides, reproach them for choosing to give continued prominence to them and for thereby condoning the gender inequalities they seem to endorse. And according to Gage’s interpretation of the history of Christianity, St Paul is indeed blameworthy for precisely this. To be precise, Paul’s ‘teaching that Adam, first created, was not first in sin, divided the unity of the human race in the assumption that woman was not part of the original creative idea but a secondary thought, an

4. ‘To the woman [the Lord] said, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you”’ (Genesis 3.16 NRSV). For a Muslim account of women’s ongoing punishment for Eve’s misbehaviour, see Al-Ghazali’s list of its eighteen forms in his Book of Council for Kings, cited in Ibn Warraq, Why I Am Not a Muslim (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), p. 300.
5. See Genesis 2.7 and 21–23.
6. Cited in Ibn Warraq, Why I Am Not a Muslim, p. 295. Many misogynistic hadiths, such as this one, are regarded as authentic by traditional Muslims. However, Fatima Mernissi challenges the reliability of some of them in her book The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam (trans. Mary Jo Lakeland; Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991).
inferior being brought into existence as an appendage to man.' And in Gage’s view, it is this deeply misogynistic and dualist theological anthropology that has been the cause of much of the suffering endured by women throughout the Christian era. This particular anthropolo-
ygy, which became enshrined in the teaching of the Christian Church, was subsequently used to justify the formulation of different rights for women and for men in both Church and state. It was also used to justify the existence of two moral codes: one code for women and another for men. Thus, Gage argues that the nineteenth-century social order was built on these religiously dubious patriarchal theories; and she concludes that once this is recognized, then women’s struggle for social and political equality with men will be considerably easier.

Moreover, Gage, in going straight to what many later religious femi-
nists, such as Mary Daly, would take to be the heart of the problem, proceeds to criticize the exclusively male conception of God that domi-
nates Christianity. As she writes: ‘To the theory of “God the Father”, … shorn of the divine attribute of motherhood, is the world beholden for its most degrading beliefs, its most infamous practices’. And in Gage’s analysis, one of the most serious consequences of the concept ‘God the Father’ is that it has led to the exclusion of women from leadership roles within the Christian Church. As she points out, during the early Christian centuries women occupied prominent and important roles in the Christian community, and it took several hundred years before they were totally ousted, before their capacity to represent God was denied, and before the all-male priesthood was ensconced.

Furthermore, in Gage’s view, the persecution of those suspected of witchcraft was to be explained by the widely-held belief that women were inherently wicked. In other words, it was yet another result of the core Christian convictions that women were created inferior to men and that a woman was the first to sin. So, the persecution of witches had the same basic cause as the legal inequalities that still plagued women in Gage’s time. And these legal inequalities were considerable: ‘even in this year 1892, within eight years of the Twentieth Christian century, we find the largest proportion of the United States still giving the husband custody of the wife’s person; the exclusive control of the children of the marriage; of the wife’s personal and real estate; the absolute right to her

7. Gage, Woman, Church and State, p. 54.
9. Gage, Woman, Church and State, p. 69.
labor and the products of her industry’. Consonant with her analysis, Gage found that the most vigorous opposition to women’s claims to be granted equal rights came from the clergy, who, more than most, were committed to the dogma of women having been created inferior to men. Consider a sermon preached in 1880 by an English clergyman to a largely female audience in Philadelphia:

God made himself to be born of woman to sanctify the virtue of endurance; loving submission is an attribute of woman; men are logical, but women lacking this quality, have an intricacy of thought. There are those who think that women can be taught logic; this is a mistake, they can never by any power of education arrive at the same mental status as that enjoyed by man, but they have a quickness of apprehension, which is usually called leaping at conclusions, that is astonishing. There, then, we have distinctive traits of a woman, namely: endurance, loving submission and quickness of apprehension. Wifehood is the crowning glory of a woman. In it she is bound for all time. To her husband she owes the duty of unqualified obedience. There is no crime which a man can commit which justifies his wife leaving him or applying for that monstrous thing, divorce. It is her duty to subject herself to him always, and no crime that he can commit can justify her lack of obedience. If he be a bad or wicked man, she may gently remonstrate with him, but refuse him, never.

Gage observes that while this sermon was preached during ‘the full blaze of the nineteenth century’, which saw itself as so progressive, the view of women it expresses is drawn directly from the dark ages. Incredibly, this kind of argument was still being deployed well into the twentieth century in order to deny women equal rights. As is well-known, many Christians nowadays cultivate an image that projects the power for liberation within the Christian message. But at the end of the nineteenth century, the Church could hardly be viewed as standing out as a power for the liberation of women. Summing up her conclusions, Gage declares:

From all these incontrovertible facts in church and state, we see that both religion and government are essentially masculine in their present forms and development. All the evils that have resulted from dignifying one sex and degrading the other may be traced to one central error, a belief in a trinity of masculine gods, in one from which the feminine element is wholly eliminated.

And yet, continues Gage, this happened despite a scriptural account of creation in which male and female were declared to be created equal.

12. Quoted in Gage, Woman, Church and State, pp. 492-93.
III

Gage bequeathed twentieth-century religious feminists a penetrating diagnosis of the problem traditional religion posed to modern women. However, it was left to later feminists to develop solutions to this problem. One popular strategy was to reclaim sacred texts from what they took to be the gendered interpretations placed on them by men. Even at the beginning of the twentieth-first century, Christian and Jewish women still frequently have to remind their co-religionists that there are two creation stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first to appear, although not the most ancient, is found in Gen. 1.1–2.3.\textsuperscript{15} Within this alternative account can be found the following description of how God created humans:

\begin{quote}
Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness…’

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

In contrast to the now more famous creation story, the noteworthy feature of this version of the myth is that both male and female are declared to be created in the image of God. This might be taken to suggest that there is some sense in which God is both male and female. Consequently, this particular text cannot be so easily used to support an anthropology that portrays women and men as intrinsically unequal. Jewish and Christian feminists, therefore, argue that this account, which they have taken to emphasize gender equality, ought to be given priority within their traditions.

This attempt to take control of sacred texts is typical of what happened in the twentieth century when, for the first time, large numbers of women began to read the texts for themselves, and to read them critically. Once they were no longer dependent upon males for an interpretation of the sacred texts, women claimed to notice a selective bias lying behind the choice of texts emphasized within their traditions. In the Christian Scriptures, for example, God is depicted by a rich array of metaphors and parables. Yet only a small selection of these have been adopted by the Christian tradition and allowed to play a significant role in the way that Christians conceptualize God. Feminists have pointed out that those metaphors and parables that have been selected

\textsuperscript{15} Genesis 1.1–2.3 is dated at about 400 BCE; while Genesis 2.4–3.24, which provides the better-known account, is dated at approximately 900 BCE.

\textsuperscript{16} Genesis 1.26a and 27 (NRSV).
for extensive use are invariably ones drawn from male rather than female experience. In the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 15, for instance, two parables are presented: the parable of the lost sheep; and the parable of the woman and the lost coin. Each attempts to illustrate the joy felt by God over a sinner’s repentance. The Christian tradition, however, has given a central place to only one of these parables—that of the shepherd and the lost sheep. This parable is based on the male figure of the shepherd, and it is this which has entered into the Christian imagination—as can be seen from the many works of Christian art depicting the scene. The parable of the woman and the lost coin, by contrast, has not been elaborated by the tradition, and does not have any extensive body of painting representing it. One aim of feminist readings of scripture is to identify such neglected texts, and to begin building a tradition of interpretation around them. Indeed, the twentieth century witnessed the burgeoning of a whole industry of feminist interpretations of the sacred texts.

Jewish feminists, in contrast to their Christian counterparts, have devoted considerable attention to Exod. 19.15, in which Moses gives this warning to his people: ‘Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman’. This verse has troubled many Jewish women, for ‘the third day’ is when the Israelites are scheduled to receive the covenant. As Judith Plaskow writes, this text is particularly disturbing:

at the very moment that the Jewish people stand at Sinai ready to receive the covenant—not now the covenant with individual patriarchs but with the people as a whole—at the very moment when Israel stands trembling waiting for God’s presence to descend upon the mountain, Moses addressed the community only as men.… At the central moment of Jewish history, women are invisible. Whether they too stood there trembling in fear and expectation, what they heard when the men heard these words of Moses, we do not know. It was not their experience that interested the chronicler or that informed and shaped the Torah.17

Traditional Jewish identity is intimately bound to a consciousness of membership within a community that is unique in having entered into a covenant with God. Many Jews regard the experience of living within this covenant as the core religious experience of Judaism. Plaskow, however, observes that from the beginnings of the tradition, this experience has been presented as available only to men— as women were not included in the official account of the giving and receiving of the covenant. Moreover, she charges that this exclusion of women from the original covenant:

sets forth a pattern recapitulated again and again in Jewish sources. Women’s invisibility at the moment of entry into the covenant is reflected in the content of the covenant which, in both grammar and substance, addresses the community as male heads of households. It is perpetuated by the later tradition, which in its comments and codifications takes women as objects of concern or legislation but rarely sees them as shapers of tradition and actors in their own lives.\(^{18}\)

Plaskow’s observations seem warranted, as any survey of the trajectory of Jewish tradition from its earliest days to the present appears to confirm. When the rabbis codified *halakah* (Jewish law), they legislated as if the requirements of the covenant rested principally on the male members of the community. The majority of the 613 commandments, which the covenant requires Jews to keep, are only binding on adult males. Many Jewish feminists now claim that if women are to participate fully in Judaism, then it is essential for *halakah* to be reformed.\(^{19}\) It is also significant that the commandments which women are typically not required to fulfil are those that concern public religious worship and study. In addition, the tradition appears to suffer from an overwhelming tendency to portray women as less than persons.\(^{20}\)

All of this has led some Jewish women to question seriously whether they are actually included in the covenant with God. ‘Are women Jews?’, asks Rachel Adler.\(^{21}\) Nevertheless, Plaskow speaks for many Jewish feminists when she asserts that

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\text{[t]o accept our absence from Sinai would be to allow the male text to define us and our connection to Judaism. To stand on the ground of our experience, on the other hand, to start with the certainty of our membership in our own people is to be forced to re-member and recreate its history, to reshape Torah. It is to move from anger at the tradition, through anger to empowerment. It is to begin the journey toward the creation of a feminist Judaism.}^{22}\]

In Plaskow’s analysis, then, a key aim of Jewish feminism is ‘to reshape Torah’. Within the Jewish tradition this is the issue for which the challenge of modern women to traditional religion is at its most intense.

\(^{19}\) Rachel Adler attempts precisely such a reformation in *Engendering Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997).
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Plaskow is aware that there will be a great deal of resistance to the claim that the reshaping of Torah is a legitimate intention. Torah is traditionally regarded as the product of a direct revelation from God, providing the blueprint for a divinely sanctioned lifestyle, which is thought to be valid for all time. Any Jew who wants to participate in the feminist project must reject this traditional view of Torah. But, as Plaskow also counsels, rejecting the traditional view is not enough; if the feminist wishes to remain within the Jewish tradition, then she must provide an alternative conception of the link between Torah and revelation.

Plaskow looks for an alternative in the ancient Jewish kabbalistic tradition. There, she finds a distinction between the primordial Torah, which is identified with God’s essence, and the incomplete and partial expression of this, which has been codified by men. It is a short step to the idea that each person, through study and prayer, can gain a unique perspective on the primordial Torah. However, declares Plaskow, as she presses this kabbalistic idea into the service of Jewish feminism,

this image of the relation between hidden and manifest Torah reminds us that half the souls of Israel have not left for us the Torah they have seen. Insofar as we can begin to recover women’s experience of God, insofar as we can restore a part of their history and vision, we have more of the primordial Torah, the divine fullness, of which the present Torah is only a fragment and a sign.  

This view of the original Torah as transcending the seemingly androcentric document that has been passed down through the generations and enshrined in the tradition gives Jewish feminists a new freedom to challenge and re-shape the text. This new freedom in dealing with the written form has converged with the rising tide of scepticism regarding any insistence that the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are a literal record of God’s direct speech. Over the course of the twentieth century, areas of scholarship as diverse as palaeontology, particle physics and biblical criticism have made it increasingly difficult for educated moderns to regard the scriptures of the various traditions as literally true. Serious doubts have been cast on the historical veracity of the Sinai narrative, and few well-educated people today regard the creation stories as literal accounts of what happened. Consequently, debates about the interpretation of scripture can no longer be settled simply by appealing to a purportedly neutral reading of the text, as ostensibly offered by traditional rabbis, priests, or mullas. Feminists from all three Abrahamic faiths have been claiming the right to interpret sacred texts for themselves.

23. Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, p. 34.
The texts, however, present undeniable obstacles to women’s efforts at interpreting them. Women can easily find themselves embroiled in a battle with the representatives of a tradition of interpretation that typically claims to hold a pedigree traceable back to the early days of the religious community. Some feel that this is a battle that women cannot win. As Ibn Warraq, for example, opines when commenting on the situation within Islam:

to do battle with the orthodox, the fanatics, and the mullas in the interpretation of these texts is to do battle on their...terms, on their ground. [For] every text that you produce they will adduce a dozen others contradicting yours. The reformists cannot win on these terms—whatever mental gymnastics the reformists perform, they cannot escape the fact that Islam is deeply antifeminist. Islam is the fundamental cause of the repression of Muslim women and remains the major obstacle to the evolution of their position. Islam has always considered women as creatures inferior in every way: physically, intellectually, and morally. This negative vision is divinely sanctioned in the Koran, corroborated by the hadiths and perpetuated by the commentaries of the theologians...

Many religious feminists regardless of their particular faith would agree—at least to a certain extent—claiming that a negative vision of women is ingrained not only in the Qur’an but in the sacred texts of each of the monotheisms. However, aware of the important place occupied by these texts within the so-called religions of the Book, they realize that they have no option if they want to remain within their traditions but to confront these texts. One of the main problems with the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the excessive and all-but-exclusive use of male images within their respective religious symbolism. This problem is mitigated, however, once an obligation to interpret these texts literally is no longer felt.

Many Jewish, Christian and Muslim women have thus been exercising a new sense of freedom in interpreting the texts of their scriptures noting that, as Fatima Mernissi remarks: ‘[d]epending on how it is used, the sacred text can be a threshold for escape or an insurmountable barrier. It can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it’. In accordance with this realization, there are abundant examples of creative re-writing of scriptures, prayer books and liturgies in order to give greater prominence to women. For example, religious feminists

24. Ibn Warraq, Why I Am Not a Muslim, p. 293.
25. Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite, p. 64.
26. An early example was the Woman’s Bible by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, published in 1895. On the significance of this work, see Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 7-14.
have striven to insert feminine imagery into these documents in an attempt to balance out the masculine. However, this strategy of altering the balance between male and female imagery within sacred texts is, of course, closed to all those within religious communities who are wedded to a literal interpretation of such texts, be they Jewish, Christian or Muslim. But excepting such religious literalists, throughout the twentieth century there has been a growing acceptance that all texts are interpreted to a greater or lesser extent. The question is: Who is responsible for the interpretation?

Women have become increasingly aware that, due to many factors, perhaps chief among which is access to education, the interpretation of sacred texts has been the preserve of men. This has meant, according to many feminists, that the traditional interpretations of these texts are far from neutral or objective, but are, instead, gendered. For if the meaning of a text is not automatically provided by the words on the page, but is, rather, the result of a process whereby the text is interpreted through the lens of the reader’s experience, and if the readers of the text are male, then the interpretation which is arrived at will likely be masculinist.

One notable example of an attempt at re-interpreting a sacred text from a woman’s perspective is that of Amina Wadud-Muhsin, an African-American Muslim feminist, who construes interpretation as a product which ‘reflects, in part, the intentions of the text, as well as the “prior text” of whoever performs the interpretation.’ By ‘prior text’ she means the ‘perspectives, circumstances, and background of the individual’ interpreter. On the basis of this understanding of what is involved in interpreting a text, she specifically aims to provide an interpretation of the Qur’an that will be ‘meaningful to women living in the modern era’. In her view, traditional interpretations of the Qur’an are not meaningful to modern women precisely because they ‘were generated without the participation and firsthand representation of women’. Nevertheless, the exclusion of women from an interpretative role should not be equated with their exclusion from the message within the text, and Wadud-Muhsin proposes that women’s ‘voicelessness during critical periods of development in Qur’anic

29. Wadud-Muhsin, Qur’an and Woman, p. 1. Wadud-Muhsin is not, of course, the only Muslim who reads the Qur’an from a critical feminist perspective. See also Asma Barlas, ‘Believing Women’ in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
interpretation has...been mistakenly equated with voicelessness in
the text itself'.

Wadud-Muhsin clearly believes that present within the Qur’an, and
waiting to be deployed, are the resources for an interpretation that will
prove liberatory for modern women. As a Muslim wanting to reclaim
rather than abandon her religion, she emphasizes the importance of the
relationship between the core text—namely, the Qur’an—and her own
liberatory interpretation of it. Most importantly, it is not, in her view, the
core text nor the principles which it propounds that change, but only the
‘prior text’—that is, the ‘perspectives, circumstances, and background
of the individual’ interpreter. The onus, then, is on each historically and
culturally located individual to assimilate the revelation contained in the
Qur’an. Such assimilation will involve developing new interpretations
that allow the core principles of the Qur’anic revelation to be expressed in
a manner appropriate to each particular time and place. Indeed, Wadud-
Muhsin goes so far as to accuse Muslims who deny the necessity for
developing new Qur’anic interpretations of contradicting Islam’s claim
to be a universal religion. For, in her view, Islam succeeds in being uni-
versal not by having a single, canonical formulation but by being capable
of assimilation in different ways by different cultures.

Having made the case for the legitimacy, indeed necessity, of a variety
of interpretations of the Qur’an, Wadud-Muhsin proceeds to argue that
the interpreter’s specific conception of gender-difference will be part of
her or his ‘prior text’. In other words, how any particular person views
the differences between women and men is not, in her view, an essential
component of the message contained in the Qur’an. And this implies that
it is perfectly acceptable to interpret the text from the standpoint offered
by an alternative perspective on gender—say, a feminist one.

Wadud-Muhsin’s argument thus has far-reaching implications, for it
challenges the religious anthropology that many Muslims have taken
to be fundamental to Islam. According to this traditional anthropology,
there are essential differences between men and women. These differ-
ces are often expressed in claims regarding women falling short of
men in important respects: they are weaker; less intelligent; more prone
to evil; and spiritually inferior. Moreover, these differences are thought
to have been deliberately created by Allah. Hence, they are taken to
justify the de-valuing of women which, many accuse, is endemic within
traditional forms of Muslim society. This religious anthropology has
also been used in an attempt to justify a denial of basic freedoms to
Muslim women, such as the freedom to choose whom to marry, to
obtain an education, to pursue a career, or even to leave the house.

But if an androcentric anthropology is external to the essential revelation, and is, instead, a product of the cultural background of those who have interpreted it, then, as Wadud-Muhsin argues, Islam could, in principle, escape the burden of misogyny. For if she is right, then the only reason why Islam and the Qur’an have been perceived to be androcentric and patriarchal is that those who claimed for themselves the exclusive right to interpret the text, and thus shape the tradition, were imbued with the vice of misogyny. But not everyone need be so prejudiced. Wadud-Muhsin would, therefore, no doubt agree with this heartfelt exclamation from Nazira Zein-ed-Din, a Muslim feminist active in the 1920s:

I only wish that those who pretend to protect Islam and raise its banners would look in the same way as I do and see what I see. I wish they did not look at Islam through the narrow vision of commentaries and interpretations which interpret Islam in ways they want to see it. Islam is far beyond that. It is much greater.32

IV

Feminists from each of the Abrahamic religions are united in their claim that (what they denounce as) patriarchal religious traditions have systematically excluded women from contributing to traditionally accepted interpretations of the sacred texts. As we have noted, feminist theologians faced with this situation have attempted to interpret the scriptures of their traditions from the standpoint provided by their own experience as women.33 And twentieth-century religious feminists were quick to realize that once women began to interpret sacred texts for themselves they would have a powerful tool with which to mount a critique of the theological traditions that had excluded them. For example, writing within a Christian context, Rosemary Radford Ruether—one of the first twentieth-century religious feminists to produce a ‘feminist theology’—makes a point of expressing the radical potential of using the experience of women as a source of scriptural interpretation and theology:

33. Early feminists tended to refer to ‘women’s experience’. Late twentieth-century feminists, however, came to feel that ‘women’s experience’ is an overly abstract concept. Consequently, later feminist works emphasize that the experience of women is not homogenous but richly varied, being dependent upon factors such as social status and ethnic background. Distinctive forms of theology have developed from this recognition of difference, one of the most prominent being ‘womanist theology’, which draws on the experience of black American women Christians.
The use of women’s experience in feminist theology...explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on male experience rather than on universal human experience. Feminist theology makes the sociology of theological knowledge visible, no longer hidden behind mystifications of objectified divine and universal authority.  

Feminists have therefore argued that, even today, Judaism, Christianity and Islam depend upon a background theological framework that is inherently patriarchal.

What all this seems to suggest is that when women’s experience is applied to their religious texts, a new interpretation seems to be demanded, regardless of whether the religious text is within the Jewish, Christian or Islamic traditions. And this further suggests that as women achieve greater opportunities for assessing their sacred texts themselves, this will have a growing effect on how the texts are read, on the religious institutions that claim to be justified by them and on the core religious concepts, such as ‘God’, that lie at the heart of those texts. Thus, as Daphne Hampson succinctly observes with respect to Christian religious thought: ‘theology, as we have known it, has been the creation of men; indeed men living within a patriarchal society. As women come into their own, theology will take a different shape’.  

We might add: and so will the religious texts upon which theology is premised, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim.