

**"Re-membering Anew: Narrative and Story in Modern Religion"**  
(Genesis 1:14-19: Ruth 1:3-19)

"God made the two great lights: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night, and the stars," Genesis tells us this but we find here a contradiction. Are they two great lights, suggesting equality, or are they greater and lesser lights, suggesting hierarchy? According to the Midrash, the female moon, seizing upon the "two great lights" asks, "How can two kings wear one crown?" And God responds, "You, go make yourself smaller." But the moon protests the unfairness of this decree, and God reconsiders, "in the world to come you will be returned to your fullness".

The ambiguity and injustice found in the discrepancy between the two great lights and the greater and lesser light remains with us today. Even here at Stanford. The Stanford Associated Religions or SAR is the umbrella organization for the many faiths and practices supported by the Office for Religious Life. A few years ago for a SAR meeting, we asked the leaders of several religious communities to bring a troubling text, and to share how each leader would teach that particular text in the context of his or her religious community. I commented to our Catholic Chaplain Father Patrick Labelle, that it would have been fun if we had each responded to the same text, but were we to do that, we wouldn't have had the surprise of seeing which texts each tradition regarded as troubling. Clergy representing Judaism, Islam, Evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholicism each identified a troubling text. I brought the Exodus description I spoke about last week: the preparation for the revelation at Sinai in which only the men are addressed, raising the question of whether women are part of the covenant. The Evangelical Christian text was concerned with proscribing the subordination of women in marriage. The Roman Catholic text acknowledged that celibacy was the ideal manifestation of closeness to God and then tried to determine what the proper spiritual path is for the faithful who are sexually active and married. The Muslim text appeared to impart a religious justification for wife beating.

Without collaboration, each religious leader taught a text about women or gender relations. The fact that what troubles each of these four religious communities was, in every case, related to gender relations, teaches us that the moon's protest is with us still: no religious community, regardless of how conservative or ancient, can navigate modernity without addressing the place of women in their world view.

The Southern Baptists have received much press and in some circles, notoriety, for their conservative positions on women--first their declaration that women must submit to their husbands, and then their contention that "the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture". With the headline, "Against An Immoral Tide", the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. Albert Mohler Jr. famously wrote in the New York Times. "Arguments over women in the pastorate and order in the

Christian home are not well understood by outside observers. For the vast majority of Southern Baptists, these issues are settled by the word of God...Southern Baptists experience family trouble like everyone else, but at least they know how God intended to order the family.”

Mohler continues, “In essence, Southern Baptists are engaged in a battle against modernity, earnestly contending for the truth and authority of an ancient faith. To the cultured critics of religion, we are the cantankerous holdouts against the inevitable. But so far as the Southern Baptist Convention is concerned, the future is in God’s hands. If faithfulness requires the slings and arrows of outraged opponents, so be it.”

If the Southern Baptists are engaged in a battle against modernity, the battleground is the role of women in the public and private domains. They are drawing a line in the sand as they answer the questions posed by modernity.

In their book, The Future of Religion, sociologists Stark and Bainbridge note that religious communities choose two opposing strategies when they encounter secularism. One strategy is to innovate, to continue to renew and absorb appealing aspects of the secular world in order to keep religious communities fresh and organic. The other approach is to conserve, to create a tighter seal between the dangerous world of the outside and the safer world of the inside. For religious conservatives, the conserving strategy is in full force. We can all cite examples of those who circle the wagons against the onslaught of the feminist danger. For innovative religious communities, a commitment to gender equality has been absorbed, with congregations calling women clergy to lead them, questioning male God language, eagerly creating new rituals, and studying texts about women.

Approaching sacred texts with a new set of questions, with attention to the place of women in those texts has challenged and deepened the encounter between tradition and modernity. Azizah Al-Hibri, author of Islam, Law and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women’s Rights, regards America as a great gift to Muslim women for providing a setting in which they have greater opportunity to study Muslim texts and traditions than in most other parts of the world. Al-Hibri asserts that the only way Muslim women can bridge the gulf between the inherent justice of Islamic principles and their experiences of religious injustice and oppression is by acquiring the tools of Muslim jurisprudence. Once women study religious texts, she argues, they can identify and expunge the patriarchal influences of past cultures from Islamic laws.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Jewish theologian Rachel Adler understands that textual scholarship is necessary for religious justice. Feminists are asking questions of the text never before asked, questions that the tradition cannot fathom. She introduces a word coined by post-Christian theologian Mary Daly: the word is “methodolatry”, a play on methodology and idolatry. Methodolatry describes a process where the method itself determines which problems can be addressed. Any questions that do not fit the categories of the method are then classified as non-data. When Adler asks new questions, she encounters resistance. The idolatry of the method. Are women are part of the covenant? How can the traditional

Talmudic discussion of child rape be restricted to whether that child's dowry should be that of a virgin? Critics respond that the problem is not with the tradition, but with her questions, or with the inadequacy of her scholarship. Methodolatry. For these male interpreters and legislators, women's holiness is contextual--dependent upon the men who they are related to as fathers, brothers, husbands, brothers-in-law. Only when women acquire the tools of textual interpretation and legislation and wield them with knowledge and authority, along with men who share their egalitarian commitments, will the religious traditions change and reflect equality between men and women.

Courageous contemporary interpreters look to the past for encouragement and find there both hope and concern. The story of the first woman ordained in America in 1853 is a cautionary tale. Antoinette Brown Blackwell attended Oberlin College, known equally for its abolitionism and for its policy of admitting women. What may be less well known, however, is that the college, sponsored by the Congregationalist Church, ordained Congregationalist ministers. Although Antoinette Brown received the proper training to become a minister, the College refused to ordain her. Nevertheless, soon after graduation, a small church in South Butler, New York called her to become their pastor. They had been unable to find a pastor for the paltry annual salary of \$300—as much as this parish could afford. The congregation called a woman. They decided to ordain her and found a Methodist minister to officiate at her ordination. But after only eight months as their pastor, Brown resigned her parish, never to return to formal ministry. In the pulpit, she was plagued by loneliness, depression, a crisis of faith, tensions with women church members, and personal and professional insecurity. She also experienced a growing distance from her friends, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone, feminists who didn't understand her interest in religion. All of this contributed to a decline in her physical health. Once she recovered, Antoinette Brown took up writing and lecturing, and ministering privately to her friends. In her late seventies, having become a Unitarian, she was appointed minister emeritus and preached monthly in a Unitarian congregation in Elizabeth, New Jersey until she turned ninety.

Much in Antoinette Brown Blackwell's story mirrors the experience of pioneering women clergy in our own day. The problems she experienced in her studies and her pulpit, her inner doubts, her later conflicts between the twin demands of family and public life and her decision not to pursue a standard ministerial career path are as daunting now as they were 150 years ago. Yet, in shaping a non-traditional career path, Brown Blackwell managed to use the knowledge, skills, professional competence and even her title to change the world. Her training empowered her.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite the social and internal problems experienced by women who are seeking ordination or are ordained, interest in ordination is growing. Today, in the Lutheran community, 15 % of ordained clergy are women--and over 50% of current seminarians are women. Some have speculated that as women attend seminary in increasing numbers, fewer men will regard the ministry as a worthy enterprise--a variation on "There goes the neighborhood!"

But the rise in women's interest in ordination is not surprising. Seeing women in the pulpit makes it possible for girls and young women to imagine themselves as participants rather than onlookers in their religious communities. This has some humorous moments. One of my colleagues tells that when she first assumed her pulpit, she tried to do everything that her predecessor did. But even when she did the same things he did, they looked and sounded different. In preparing her first Bat Mitzvah student, the young thirteen-year old girl looked up at her as they practiced on the pulpit and she asked, "At my bat mitzvah, do you think we can wear matching dresses?"

Another of my colleagues tells of becoming an associate in a large and prestigious congregation in Manhattan. The senior clergyman who had hired her had changed the language of the prayer book many years earlier to make it gender neutral. She read the service in the same way. But at the end of her first service, a congregant came up to him to complain, "See, you hire a woman and the first thing she does is change the prayer book!"

In spite of the fear that the only reason women want to become clergy is to press a feminist point, most women seek ordination for the same reason most men do--to enable their service to God. In her book, The Close: A Young Woman's First Year at Seminary, Episcopal Priest Chloe Breyer understands her calling to the priesthood by turning to the biblical story of Esther. A young Jewish woman, chosen as queen of the Persian Kingdom, Esther is asked by her uncle Mordechai to thwart plans by one of the king's evil advisors to massacre every Jew in the land. When Esther explains the personal danger she would face in trying to persuade the king to withdraw his royal edict, Mordechai warns her that if she does not act, she too, will be destroyed. And, he adds, "Who knows whether you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this?"

That question, "Who knows whether you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this?" became a touchstone for Breyer in her first year in seminary. She ends her memoir by writing, "Esther's true entrance into the kingdom comes only when she wagers her life and position of dignity in order to serve outsiders, the people of no importance. The kingdom, she realizes, is not the palace, its jeweled hallways or the esteemed status she occupies. Her kingdom, to be complete, must embrace the lives and well-being of those who live outside its golden gates".<sup>iii</sup>

For almost every ordained woman I know, the idea of becoming a clergyperson was suggested by someone else. Few of us were groomed to take on the mantle of religious leadership. Someone else needed to imagine us in the position before we could imagine it for ourselves.

Breyer describes a moment in seminary when the women realize what was missing in their childhood—"I had a Doctor Barbie and a Businesswoman Barbie, but I never did find a Clerical Barbie. Envisioning her mini ordination in a Barbie Dream Chapel, one of her classmates asks, "Can you imagine her changing her chasuble for the seasons and the high holy days?" Enjoying the fantasy of Barbie in her clerical

vestments, they wonder what has delayed Clerical Barbie's introduction for the next Christmas.

If Bryer and her sister seminarians can imagine new plastic role models, while becoming modern flesh and blood role models, they also can find within ancient stories of women, new questions. My favorite collection by courageous women examines the biblical book of Ruth by women who are psychologists and religious seekers, teachers and scholars, mothers and daughters-in-law. In the diverse essays found in Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story, no one interpretation predominates over any other. The various interpretations exist as a pluralistic feminist witness to the complexity and opening that sacred texts provide. To answer fresh questions, feminists make use of whatever disciplines, experience and knowledge are known to the questioners. None of us can read these texts without awareness of what questions modernity has posed. None of us can remain satisfied walling off the world of the sacred from the world of the secular. We live in a world where assumptions are confronted, where authority is challenged, where orthodoxies are questioned.

As we insist that being faithful does not mean being uncritical, as we lovingly challenge yet embrace our traditions, as we contribute new interpretations to old texts, as we create our place in the story, we look both to religious leaders and to lay women to shape religious experiences. May we together re-member anew as we unite the contributions of our foremothers, grandmothers, mothers and daughters, teachers, ministers, rabbis and scholars, offering full light to our religious communities. May we be privileged to help restore the moon to her fullness. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> One Nation Under God? Religion and American Culture, Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz

<sup>ii</sup> . Jonathan Sarna, "From Antoinette Brown Blackwell to Sally Priesand: An Historical Perspective on the Emergence of Women in the American Rabbinate" in Women Rabbis: Exploration and Celebration, ed. Gary Zola, 1996

<sup>iii</sup> The Close: A Young Woman's First Year at Seminary, Chloe Bryer, Introduction, p. 254