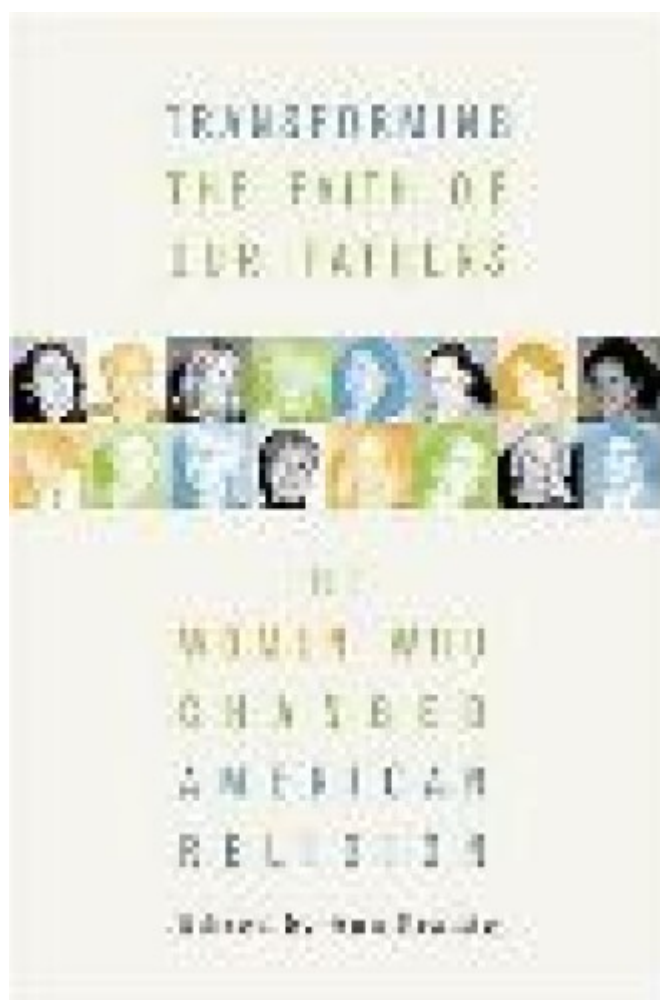


Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers

reviewed by [Alena Amato Ruggerio](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion

Ann Braude
Palgrave Macmillan

Harvard Divinity School's 2002 Religion in the Feminist Movement Conference drew overwhelming interest. The demand for seats was so high that participants spilled from the conference hall into a second room where speeches were projected onto a video screen. Ann Braude's book (she was one of the conference organizers) now gives everyone access to those speeches—the stories of some of the major figures in 20th-century American religious feminism.

The 16 prominent leaders of second-wave religious feminism who here share their lives challenge stereotypes: they assure us that feminism is neither entirely secular nor monolithic; that feminism and religion are not mutually exclusive; and that feminism is certainly not dead. Islam, Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Mormonism, Catholicism, mainline and evangelical Protestantism, Buddhism and Goddess religion are all represented. The diversity extends to different racial, ethnic class and professional identities. The narrators are theologians, clergy, academics and activists.

Whereas “malestream” history tends to obscure the minutiae of everyday life and lift up superachievers who seem to win their status single-handedly, these narratives show the human faces behind the organizations and landmark books of the past 50 years of faith-based feminism. Telling these stories is itself a feminist act, preserving a history of the movement in the voices of its agents.

Not all the famous women who addressed the conference were able to be included in the book. The most notable absences are post-Christian author Mary Daly and renowned historian Gerda Lerner. But the book is supplemented by a Web site, <http://tinyurl.com/5cd3r>, which features a video of each speech as it was delivered. The chapter endnotes also provide an exciting but manageable reading list for those who want to learn more.

Be prepared for the intense pain that has marked many of these lives. I wept with Margaret Toscano as she recounted her excommunication from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I grieved with Letty Cottin Pogrebin, barred from saying the *kaddish* funeral prayer over her own mother's grave because females did not count in the *minyan*, or Jewish quorum. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's story ends in the joy of acceptance, but only after a long journey through abuse, death threats and ostracism from her Christian fundamentalist past. Riffat Hassan responds to the patriarchal restrictions on Pakistani Muslim women through wrenching poetry.

Clearly, breaking new ground exacts its price in suffering.

But the accounts are not without humor. Former moderator of the United Church of Canada Lois Miriam Wilson describes a conversation she had with an Orthodox priest who “told me quite seriously that I could never be ordained because I couldn’t grow a beard. I thanked him for the insight.” Adrian Dominican Prioress Nadine Foley recounts an Irish Carmelite monk’s insensitive objection to the new constitutions of women religious: “‘I notice that you use the word ‘woman’ frequently in this document,’ [he told me]. I replied that I did not think we had overused the word. His response was, ‘Well, you don’t want to use words that are just a fad.’”

The enthusiastic reaction to the conference and the publication of this book prove that passion is still high at the intersection of feminism and religion. Of the 300 participants at the conference, one third were young women. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carol Christ encourage the upcoming generation—the third wave—to represent the history of the religious second wave in all its complexity, acknowledging the sensitivity to race of some white theologians and respecting the ethical system contributed by Goddess religion. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza warns against forgetting the groundbreaking work of the past when she quips that since she could not study feminist theology, she had to help invent it.

Blu Greenberg closes the book by inviting the activists of the future to celebrate the advances toward religious equality while protecting themselves against burnout. Braude’s book provides young feminists of faith with a richer sense of their recent heritage and inspires them to bravely live out their own stories.