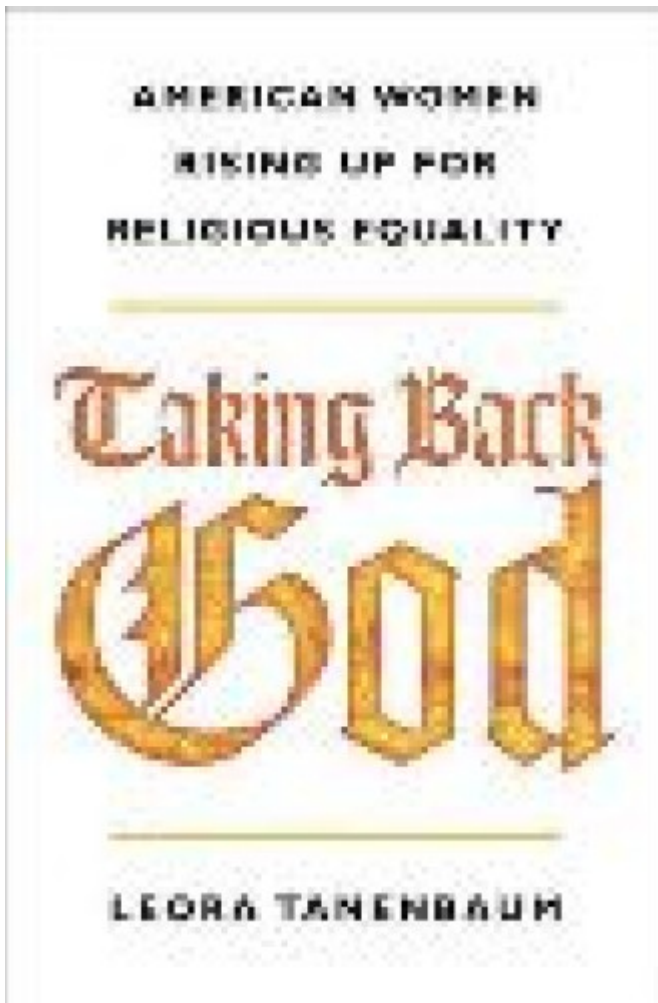


Taking Back God: American Women Rising Up for Religious Equality

reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Taking Back God: American Women Rising up for Religious Equality

Leora Tanenbaum
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Growing up in a Mennonite conference in Pennsylvania that didn't ordain women, I met plenty of folks like my mother: women and men who resisted the patriarchy of their church but who couldn't bring themselves to leave. They were an impassioned and sundry crew that included fiery women unafraid of any powers that be, soft-spoken grandmothers with head coverings, and men whose daughters came home from college and convinced them to join the cause. Together they were forever organizing task forces on gender in the church, drafting letters to the bishop board, and creating seminary scholarships for women. Finally, in 2007, they saw some fruits of their labor when a bishop in the conference ordained two women. He held the women's credentials in his district office until last year, when the conference finally agreed to hold them. Gingerly.

"Ticked-off women who stay" is how author Leora Tanenbaum describes women like my mom and her friends. Such women stand at the center of Tanenbaum's new book on gender inequality in the Catholic, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant, Orthodox Jewish, and Muslim traditions. Tanenbaum, an observant Orthodox Jew, interviewed 95 women who demonstrate what she calls the "complicated status of the devout-but-critical woman." She also traveled to mosques, synagogues and churches, attended conferences and read countless statements and position papers. The result is a remarkably accurate, cogent and in-depth portrait of gender inequality across a wide swath of American religion.

With one chapter on each of the five religious groups, Tanenbaum collates what seem to be four common goals among them: seeing women in leadership in their local church, mosque or synagogue; having women represented in some way in the language of their worship; receiving recognition from their religion that "their physical bodies are normal and not aberrant"; and receiving affirmation from their faith that women are created fully in the image of God.

Christian feminists may not find much that's new in the chapters about their own tradition, including the one about mainline denominations that centers largely on the question of whether the so-called feminization of the pulpit and the debates over language in worship are pushing heterosexual men away from attendance and leadership. (Tanenbaum's answer is no: "There is no reason to believe that stripping women of their vestments and offering barbeque along with the Holy Supper will usher in more men.") But the book's greatest potential lies in the possibility for readers to discern common points of struggle, history and hope between women's

experience across religious boundaries.

Christians who have wrestled with biblical interpretation around Pauline gender constructions, for example, may find richness in Islamic scholar Amina Wadud's idea of an "intervention" with scripture. Wadud suggests intervening—or, in the words of Islamic legal scholar Khaled Abou el Fadl, taking a "conscientious pause"—in places where the text seems to depart from more general notions of divine character that emerge through the rest of scripture. Citing the apparent Qur'anic acceptance of slavery and the seeming permissibility of wife-beating in at least one verse in the Qur'an, Wadud writes, "We finally arrive at a place where *we acknowledge that we intervene* with the text. The next step is to admit that we are continuing the process of intervention between text and meaning, as believers of Allah and in revelation."

Though Tanenbaum highlights ligatures between religions in terms of interpretation of scripture and struggles concerning ordination, participation in worship and gender roles in the home, she does not skip the particularities of religions in favor of some schmaltzy, we're-all-the-same avowal. She underscores the variance between expectations of equality-seeking women in different traditions and the sometimes resultant evaluation by other feminists that they are not taking the movement far enough. Orthodox Jewish feminists usually support the separation of men and women during communal prayer, for example, and some progressive Muslim feminists wear the hijab in spite of criticism from American Christian women, who assume the head covering to be a symbol of women's oppression. "Western women seeking religious equality have . . . exacted a double standard from Muslim women," writes Tanenbaum. "Although it is considered acceptable for Christian and Jewish feminist theologians to criticize their own religious traditions within a framework of acceptance, equality-minded Muslim women have been expected to renounce Islam entirely," seeing it as "unredeemable."

Unfortunately, Tanenbaum—like the American Christian women she rightly excoriates for lack of nuance in their understandings of Muslim feminism—tends at times toward oversimplification and dualism. She writes in her chapter about Catholic women, for example, that "if you read the New Testament, you can only conclude that the church's denigration of women has no biblical foundation whatsoever." If that were true, Tanenbaum could have excised Catholics, evangelicals and mainline Protestants from her research pool (and my mother and her friends could have been putting their energies elsewhere for the last 20 years). Also, in her chapter about the sexual lives of religious women, Tanenbaum

caricatures conservative Christians in Alabama who are attempting to pass a ban on abortion as “salivating over the punishment of . . . rape victims.” She seems, at points like this, unable to find a critical and justifiably angry voice that does not also overgeneralize and typecast.

Perhaps the book’s greatest flaw, however, is that its publication seems quite tardy. The title of the book’s first chapter is “Women on the Verge of an Uprising.” Weren’t religious women on the verge of an uprising in the 1960s? Or even earlier? Aren’t we way beyond the verge of an uprising by now, perhaps even into a full-blown surge? While Tanenbaum does mention some first- and second-wave religious feminists and does offer some historical backstory, she fails to make a convincing case for why women are on the verge of an uprising now, in 2009, rather than having been so 40 or 50 or more years ago.

What remains after one finishes the book, however, are not questions about style or tardiness. What sticks is a powerful sense of the cognitive dissonance common among women from diverse religious traditions who can give up neither their faith nor their desire for gender equality—women who are, in the terminology of theologians Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis and Allison Stokes, “defecting in place.” I have a feeling that my mother and her friends, Mennonite to the core, could talk for hours over coffee with Syeda Reshma Yunus, one of the Muslim women Tanenbaum interviews. She talks about entering and exiting her mosque through a door separate from the men’s entrance and sitting in the women’s section in the back: “You know how you’re supposed to come back from the mosque feeling good and spiritually recharged?” Yunus says. “I never feel that way. When I come back from the mosque, I just want to throw something at those people!”

And I imagine that my mother and her cohort, along with some of the women in Tanenbaum’s account, have fielded questions from secular friends such as “How can you stay?” and “Why not just leave?” I think their answer may have been similar to that of Catholic essayist Nancy Mairs, who recounts a conversation with her son-in-law in which he asks why, if she’s so disgruntled with how women are treated in her church, she doesn’t find another church or start one of her own. “‘I don’t want another church,’ I say to him simply. ‘I just want to get this one right.’”