News
A Woman's Place panel

"A Woman's Place" panel discussion was held at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan on Nov. 13, 2017. Seated from left to right are: Rabbi Miriam Farber Wajnberg, director of Adult Jewish Learning and Interfaith Engagement at JCC Manhattan (moderator)*, and panelists Sarah Sayeed, Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Rev. Dr. Neichelle Guidry, and Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane. (NCR photo/Jamie Manson) *An earlier version of this article misidentified Rabbi Farber Wajnberg.



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Decades of interfaith dialogue have demonstrated that there are many similarities among the three major Abrahamic faiths. Jews, Christians and Muslims share a common belief in one God. They share common characters, like prophets, angels and Satan. They bear similar codes of morality, social responsibility and accountability.

They also share a common exclusion of women from religious and spiritual leadership.

Though some branches of Judaism and denominations of Christianity have allowed women equal participation in ministry, Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches continue to dictate and enforce the idea that male superiority is ordained by God.

This theological sanctioning of sexism was the recent topic of a panel presentation called "A Woman's Place," held at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan. It featured four female faith leaders reflecting on their respective struggles for women's equality in their religious traditions.

The panelists included Rabba Sara Hurwitz, the first officially ordained Orthodox Jewish Rabba; the Rev. Dr. Neichelle Guidry, an ordained Christian minister and preacher who was recently named one of Time's "12 New Faces of Black Leadership"; Sarah Sayeed, a Muslim woman who serves as senior advisor in the Community Affairs Unit of the Mayor's Office of the City of New York; and Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane, who famously greeted Pope John Paul II during his visit to the U.S. in 1979, by urging him to include women "in all ministries of our church."

The panel was presented in conjunction with the New York film debut of "Radical Grace," which documents three irrepressible women religious who challenge the Vatican and risk their place in the church to follow their social justice callings.

Each of these panelists said it was a keen sense of God's presence in their lives that called them to dismantle the patriarchal structures of their beloved religious traditions. For all of them, the work of bringing about equality has not been without profound risk and stinging punishment.

For Hurwitz, her journey towards becoming the first Orthodox Rabba began with a deep sense of faith that she experienced as a child. "I had this idea that I had to fulfill a vision of justice that was coming from heaven," she told the audience.

In the Jewish tradition, "God's throne is surrounded by four pillars: justice, righteousness, kindness and truth," Hurwitz explained. She felt called to bring "the pillars into the world and into my work."

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Guidry's first sense of a calling also began in early childhood. Raised Catholic, she remembers becoming conscious of patriarchy and gender inequality as she was preparing for confirmation. When she asked why women could not be priests, her teacher told her that such "questions were not allowed in our Catholic education."

When Guidry's mother joined a Pentecostal church, it was her first experience of seeing a woman function like a clergyperson.

"It was a watershed moment for me," Guidry recalled, "seeing someone who looked like me proclaiming, serving, administering sacraments, and leading God's people."

The question of whether women should serve in equal roles to men also ignited the prophetic voice of Kane, who recounted a story about Loretto Sr. Mary Luke Tobin at the Second Vatican Council.

"There were 15 women from the entire world in a room with 600 or 700 men," said Kane. "Women were not allowed to speak in public at the council. [Tobin] raised question of whether the church should open itself to women in all forms of ministry in the church. That radicalized me."

Ten years after Tobin offered her challenge, Kane was invited to welcome John Paul II on behalf of U.S. women religious. The Catholic Church's continued minimization of the voices of women was apparent in the invitation. "The only instruction I got was to 'be brief because, you know, he isn't coming to listen to you,' " Kane recalled.

Kane said that her bold welcome was possible because she had spent a decade studying women in church and society with other nuns. "Having this education continually, it was not unnatural for me to greet the pope by saying 'if the church is to be faithful to the teachings of Christ, then the church as an institution must provide the opportunity for women to be in all ministries of that church.' "

For Sayeed, the exclusion of women from the Muslim community runs even deeper than religious leadership. "There is an understanding that men are required to go to Friday prayers," Sayeed said, but that women are not.

"Women are invited, but on Friday they are often told that there isn't enough space," she said. "So they tend to not go to the mosque."

When women do show up, they are often assigned to the basement where they cannot see the imam. "There are all kinds of ways that we have found to create distance between women and mosque spaces," Sayeed said.

Without women, there are also no children at the mosque, she pointed out. "There is no experience of praying with the congregation, so they lose touch with their culture and faith."

And yet, when Sayeed tries to navigate the mosque space to be more inclusive, she is often criticized for "making the mosque a more Western place, more of a feminist place."

Like Sayeed, each woman on the panel had a tale to tell about being disciplined for questioning or dismantling their religious institutions' exclusive structures.

Hurwitz said that when she was first ordained in 2010, there was little blowback. But when congregational officials later changed her title from "maharat" to "rabba," she said, "It created a firestorm."

Thirteen rabbis signed a statement calling for her excommunication. Additional edicts were decreed in 2013, 2015, and earlier this year.

"The 'r-b'-sounding title was too much for the Orthodox community to handle," she recalled.

Hurwitz said she has gotten used to doing things that make people uncomfortable, but ultimately remains mystified by all of the opposition. "All we're trying to do is serve the community and bring the voice of justice and Torah and religion and God and humanity to more people."

On of one of her darkest days, she received a phone call from an anonymous man telling her that she was destroying the Orthodox community.

"I didn't want to be the cause of any destruction ever," Hurwitz said. "We were very close to rolling back my title and to saying that maybe it was too much too soon."

But a sudden influx of letters from 11 year-old girls changed her mind. "The letters said, 'now we have a role model, now we can see ourselves having a place in the Orthodox community with women amongst its leaders,' " Hurwitz recalled. "That's what kept me going."

Sayeed, too, finds hope in the words and witness of other Muslim women, especially those from the past. "Women have been spiritual anchors for all time, for all people. It is important as a Muslim to reclaim that history."

For example, it was Kadija, Mohammed's first wife, who "had faith in him and inspired him to preach," she said. His second wife, Aisha, conserved the Hadith, the first written record of the sayings of Mohammed.

"Women are intimately connected with safeguarding faith and spirituality," Sayeed said, "I try to remind our communities that women were very much a part of the Prophet Mohammed's mosque."

Guidry said that she likewise finds inspiration in the history of women in the church.

"I feel that any woman who has ever stood in a pulpit is in some sense raging against the machine," she said. "When I stand in the pulpit to proclaim, it is my act of devotion and my act of protest."

Preaching a radical message about racism, white supremacy, and the theological sanctioning of misogyny has brought Guidry more than her share of backlash. After one of her recent sermons, an open letter of concern was written about her and circulated around the country.

Though she agreed that this fierce opposition is a sign that she is "doing something right," she said, "it is also humiliating and traumatizing and hurtful and isolating."

Guidry said it is essential and urgent that women to stand up for one another. "We have to have each other's backs," she said. "Sisterhood is one of the most radical ways we can resist the structures of patriarchy."

After her recent controversy, Guidry said she was warned that her radical message might lead churches to stop calling her to preach. But like the three panelists with whom she shared the stage, she finds the courage to make history by remembering the women who came before her.

"In the history of women who do ministry, we didn't wait for anyone to call us," Guidry said. "We just did it. I don't have to wait until some tells me its okay to speak. I speak when God says speak."

[Jamie L. Manson is NCR books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics.]