

Women's Voices – New Perspectives for the Christian–Jewish Dialogue.  
Edited by Helen Fry, Rachel Montagu and Lynne Scholefield.  
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The genesis of Women's Voices lies in a group of Jewish and Christian women who decided in 1997 to meet regularly to discuss religious issues of mutual interest. The pattern of their discourse is that a member of one faith presents a paper on a specified subject followed by questions and an hour or so of dialogue; a few weeks later a representative of the other faith tradition will give a paper in response and further debate will ensue.

Women's Voices represents in some ways a transcript of that debate and dialogue, divided into three sections: Theology, Scripture and Spiritual Journey. The nine contributors are women with an academic background who teach and write in the fields of Jewish studies, inter-faith relations and theology and who come from Catholic, Anglican and Reformed Christian communities and Reform and Liberal Jewish ones.

The first section considers issues like Feminist Theology, The Holocaust and Messiah, the second biblical texts which are particularly challenging to women – both for what they say and don't say, and the third includes discussion on, inter alia, the Eucharist, Prayer and Pilgrimage.

What makes Women's Voices such a superb collection of perspectives is not just its quality – which is as high as one might wish for – but the honesty and openness of the dialogue itself: male counterparts could learn much from the approach of our female colleagues; all too often for male clergy the wish for their opinion to be heard is paramount, whereas here the women really listen to each other.

Among some outstanding contributions I would single out the piece on the Eucharist by Sister Clare Jardine, and the response by Rabbi Marcia Plumb, and that on Life Cycles: Hearing our Traditions in the Presence of the Other by Helen P. Fry and Rabbi Kathleen de Magtige Middleton. In many ways these two subjects epitomise the dialogue and its impetus: considering important and challenging issues in our respective faith traditions and, while learning about the ways of another faith, discovering fresh insights and deeper meanings within our own.

The editors conclude by asking whether their granddaughters will need to be part of such a group, or whether a greater openness within the faith traditions to hearing women's voices will make the exercise redundant. Maybe, maybe not, but their final surmise, that such groups may happen just because of the value and benefit of women being together and engaging in such dialogue seems to be spot on!

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