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This is an important book that uses motherhood as a lens to explore women’s engagement with religious orthodoxy and hierarchy in Judaism and Catholicism. The book stems from the author’s own expressed ambiguity regarding the tension between her feminist convictions and the realities of Orthodox Jewish practice, and her recognition of how this conflict influenced her relationship with her daughters and their own connection with Judaism. Hartman Halbertal undertook extended interviews over a period of several months with a sample of Catholic and Jewish women with teenage daughters to explore the challenge these seeming contradictions pose for other women who identify as feminist, but who hold their religion as a central part of their identity. As she explains: “The women in this book are faced with mothering their daughters in cultures that to various degrees marginalize women. How do mothers resist and yet reproduce the cultural proscriptions placed on women in general and their daughters in particular? How do mothers face such a dilemma, knowing well the price to be paid by opting out of socializing their daughters, as well as the cost of passing on the culture without reflection?” (p.7).

Some of the conflicts the women encountered concerned doctrinal learning. The Jewish mothers in the study are seen grappling with whether to encourage their daughters to advance through the realm of Talmudic study, from which they were excluded until very recently, while Catholic mothers debate the value of a seminary education. The concern for both groups is that at the end of such a course of study, their daughters will not have the authority to interpret theological questions or decide issues of law, given the continued exclusion of women from the clergy. Was encouraging their daughters to fully explore the foundations of their faith giving them false expectations about the gravitas of their future roles?
Another major issue is sexuality. In both religions, ideas about appropriate expressions of sexuality differ significantly from those of mainstream American culture. However, for Catholic women in particular the issue of birth control represented an additional layer of concern, and considerable bitterness was expressed about the fact that men who would never have children controlled women’s reproduction. Both sets of women grappled with what they would do if their daughters entered a sexual relationship before marriage, or experienced an unplanned pregnancy.

One of the elements that makes the book such a powerful text is that it is not just the concerns of mothers for their daughters that come through, but also an often burning rage at the injustices and discrimination they had faced from their religious community during their own lives. One Jewish woman, for example, recalls her humiliation after winning what she perceived to be a book of religious writing in a synagogue raffle. She asked to be allowed to talk about its contents publicly in the synagogue, and was surprised when the male clergy agreed, on the condition that she not open the book until she got it home. When she opened it up in the privacy of her own room, she found it to be blank: it was a covered notebook. The lesson she took from it – that she was allowed only to be silent- haunted her into adulthood, despite her effort to challenge this regulation by giving speeches at her son’s brit milah and bar mitzvah (pp.28-29).

The book was fascinating in the space it gave to women’s efforts to grapple with religious restrictions when they felt there was a contradiction between religious law and the realities of their lives, as in Catholic women’s decisions to defy the church’s ban on birth control. A Jewish teacher described the relief she felt when she decided to stop covering her hair, despite the judgment she experienced from the community and from her daughter. She explained her decision to her daughter thus: “I simply told her that I personally can’t take it anymore. Yes, it’s true. It is the Halakhah, and even though I’m aware of this, I just can’t do it anymore, it bothers me so much” (p.104).
As a result of these conflicts, many women expressed ambivalence about whether they wished their daughters to remain in their religion, noting that they would feel differently (and more favorably) about their daughters leaving the religious community than they would their sons. They also noted that they sought to mother in a different fashion to their own mothers, by giving their daughters more room to express themselves and withholding judgment, in the hope that they would come to their own decisions about the social and religious roles they would occupy during their lives.

The book reveals much about the specific nature of the mother-daughter relationship within Orthodox Judaism. However, the comparative element adds an extra dimension, allowing the tensions between motherhood and identity to be explored in a broader context, beyond the boundaries of one single belief system. By centering the mother-daughter relationship as an anchor of socialization and cultural transmission, the book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the multi-layered ways in which religion shapes culture. Moreover, by looking at mothering from a mother’s perspective, the book also turns our attention to what responsibility for the role of socialization means for women’s own identities. Just as girls have to stop “knowing what they know” and accept a message of exclusion, subordination and objectification to successfully come of age in a patriarchal society (Gilligan, 1990: 26); so mothers have to be self-silencing in order to meet the pressures of socializing their daughters. A woman’s success as a mother is judged on the “appropriate” socialization of her daughter. For women who question some of the normative requirements of their society, this can generate turmoil and confusion: if her daughter fulfills cultural expectations, she may feel she has failed her, by helping her integrate into a system in which her needs and desires will be repressed. Yet if she encourages her to rebel, she may then feel she has failed in one of the key purposes of her role as mother (and certainly she will be judged as a failure by the wider community). Moreover, mothers are very aware of the social consequences of nonconformity, and so their instincts to
protect their daughters from social opprobrium may override their feminist values. By turning our academic attention to conundrums that are usually lived privately at an individual level, Tova Hartman Halbertal does feminist scholarship a tremendous service.