

Faith, Family, and Feminism: Irreconcilable Differences?¹

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The purpose of this article is to characterize and evaluate the phases through which feminist positions on the family have evolved in recent history and to suggest feminists in Christian and Jewish theology and religious studies as among the most important participants in current discussions about the family.

In a recent correspondence, a United Methodist colleague wrote, "My take on the name of your lecture is that instead of 'Faith, Family, and Feminism: Irreconcilable Differences?' (with a question mark) it would be better named, 'Faith, Family, and *Patriarchy*: Irreconcilable Differences'—NO QUESTION." My correspondent had read my book *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (1994) and anticipated major premises of a forthcoming book, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (1997): contrary to popular public opinion, feminists by and large are not against families per se, although they are by and large against certain kinds of families. Moreover, many feminist theologians would contend that certain families—patriarchally-organized families—are not faithful Christian families. New interpretations of scripture and Christian history challenge male dominance in Christian families. When feminism is defined as the repudiation of any ranking of people as

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inferior or superior according to various traits of human nature—a definition to which many feminists adhere—there are more people who qualify as Christian feminists than most people might initially imagine.

While reigning stereotypes that cast feminists as anti-men and anti-children may capture a bit of the flavor of feminist struggles to claim a place for women, they sorely miss the substance of the struggles. Although feminists certainly challenged institutional views of motherhood and family that constrained and harmed women, and challenged the men who depended upon these views, few feminists are actually either anti-men or anti-children.

In my remarks, I want to develop two points: (a) those struggling in families, working with families, or proposing new family programs and values in the United States need a better understanding of the phases through which feminism has evolved in its most recent history in order to make the best use of its contributions as well as to avoid some of its pitfalls; and (b) feminists in Christian and Jewish theology are among the most important participants in current discussions about the family. I will sketch the contributions of feminist theological views of the family as an important step through the impasses in secular feminism and in the family debate more generally.

Feminist theory on the family in secular circles can be traced from (a) an early individualism of secular “humanist feminism” to (b) an emphasis on women’s nature in secular “gynocentric feminism” to (c) a conservative pro-family feminism to (d) a responding progressive pro-family diversity feminism. Partially corresponding to these developments, in theological circles feminist theory on the family can be traced from (a) a humanist emphasis in early theological feminism to (b) a gynocentric religious feminism to (c) a nascent ecological religious feminism that celebrates both the personhood *and* embodied love of women *and* men.

To state my thesis in a more general way: Secular feminism needs critical appropriation of particular faith traditions and more careful deliberation on family ideals and the family debate needs a carefully reconstructed feminism to solve some of the very problems for which feminists themselves are often wrongly blamed. Feminists in religion are strongly positioned to provide both new understandings of Christian faith and new understandings of families. Neither Christian theology, nor families, nor feminism will fare well without greater effort to bring these three into significant conversation.

FEMINISM: DEFINITIONS, PERIODS, AND IMPASSES

The question—“faith, family, and feminism—are they irreconcilable?”—must be restated. We are better off asking about feminisms plural,

and indeed, faiths and families. Feminism is not and has never been monolithic. To assume feminists are anti-men, anti-children, and anti-family is inaccurate so long as there are pro-family feminists. And there are.

Why then has the question of irreconcilability surfaced? To claim oneself a feminist means minimally that one hopes for a society and perhaps a religion in which men do not dominate women, power is shared in families and beyond, and the good of women is sought as an essential part of the good society and the good faith. Not surprisingly, given these hopes, the most provocative actions by feminists have had to do with the family and with religious faith as key sites for the perpetuation of patriarchy—from challenging images of God and women's roles in religious congregations to urging a redistribution of household and mothering labor to identifying domestic violence to stressing the importance of women's economic viability (Goodrich, Rampage, Ellman, and Halstead, 1988, p. 11). One of the key problems then that feminists in religion must face, and those who wish to promote a good family theory in general, is how to preserve what is good in families and good in religious faith without preserving patriarchy? (Green, 1995, pp. 5-6).

Attempts to answer this important question have taken distinct forms among feminists. In both secular and Christian feminism, we can see a significant shift in feminist strategies from a rejection to a qualified restoration of motherhood, but the questions of motherhood and the role of families are far from resolved. In my examination, I observe two important positions or phases in recent feminist approaches to the family in the U.S.: (a) a movement from humanist, rights-oriented family ideals to gynocentric, relational family ideals (see Young, 1985; Offen, 1988) and, then, in the last decade, (b) a tension between progressive pro-family-diversity views and conservative pro-two-parent family views. Let me describe the contributions and problems of these two movements, with only brief commentary on the most recent still evolving tension.

In the 1960s and 70s, "humanist feminists" promoted the extremely important views that (a) sexual relations are social and political constructions that involve an asymmetric distribution of power between women and men; and (b) that cultural assumptions about female biology, the biological family, and child bearing and rearing have often obstructed the freedom and aspirations of women. At the same time, in claiming women's rights, humanist feminists tended to dismiss female reproduction as a curse, pregnancy as an ordeal, the keeping of a home as a debilitating imprisonment, and children as a hindrance to the development of a woman's full potential.

Humanist feminists contested powerful demons: "a post-World War II North American mindset that idealized the breadwinner husband, his homemaker wife, and the increasingly isolated suburban, nuclear household

with its fascinating gadgets and fast foods" (Miller-McLemore, 1996, p. 277). Behind this stood the nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of motherly domesticity, now firmly entrenched in the modern psyche. These images of motherhood were bolstered by religious ideals of moral piety, sexual purity, and wifely submission. And they assumed a white, middle-class whose ability to create such a unique home environment partially depended on immense sacrifices by the working class and other ethnic groups who often could not. When those in the women's movement in the 1960s challenged the 1950s image of happiness, they demanded something few women had ever had before—parity with men in the marketplace and in the household. However, in seeking equal pay and a shared family life, they neither anticipated the immense emotional and social roadblocks nor understood the ways in which their challenge to sexism was blind to racist and classist superstructures that also preserved structures of inequality (pp. 277-78).

Growing awareness of the different ways women in diverse economic and ethnic groups experienced motherhood helped initiate a change in feminist strategies (Brock, 1995). Feminist protests about the entrapments of the housewife "do not make much sense to those robbed of chances to establish safe, strong homes, or to those fighting to prepare their children for survival in a hostile, racist, and discriminatory environment" (Miller-McLemore, 1995, p. 190; see also Peters, 1988). For poor women and women of color, it is not motherhood that is the obstacle to freedom, but racism, lack of jobs, skills, education, and a number of other issues. Motherhood, rather than being derided as an exploitative, oppressive, or sexist institution, must be cherished to persist at all, for the sake of the endurance of the larger group.

Two other ingredients beside this helped cause a shift in feminist strategies: (a) the recognition by feminists of the powerful meaning and importance of motherhood itself and (b) the recognition of the notorious "second shift," the domestic labor women perform, now on top of paid employment. In *Maternal Thinking* (1989), philosopher Sara Ruddick dares to suggest that through the very act of securing children's survival mothers themselves engage in seldom recognized complex philosophical and ethical thought processes. In a kind of cultural gestalt, across a variety of disciplines, from law to literature, scholars began to notice the ways in which psychological analysis, literary critique, legal practice, moral theory, public policy, and so forth have ignored the mother as a subject. Many began to assert the critical role of the mother as thinker and participant in her own right.

Moreover, middle-class mothers who began to work glimpsed problems that working-strata women and single mothers have always known and endured to some extent: what Arlie Hochschild popularized as the "second shift." Based on time use studies done in the 1960s and 1970s, Hochschild

estimates that over a year women worked an "extra month of twenty-four-hour days a year. Over a dozen years, it was an extra year of twenty-four-hour-days" (1989, pp. 3-4, emphasis in original text). When the framework is stretched beyond the United States, the distortions only grow more apparent. A 1980 United Nations report indicates that women world-wide perform two-thirds of the world's labor, receive ten percent of the pay, and own one percent of the property.

Feminists still wanted equality with men, but now recognized that equality must recognize differences, including those differences created by motherhood. Feminists realized the import of maternal and domestic labor. As long as the workplace still expects the worker to have a wife or a servant, as long as men are no more willing to pick up the broom than their fathers, and as long as an underclass of women take care of the homes and children of those in the upper stratas, certain feminist strategies for change will simply be ineffective.

In the 1980s, feminists began to identify the problems with defining female nature as the primary vehicle of women's oppression. Instead, "gynocentric feminists" reclaimed female reproductive capacity and women's bodily experiences more generally as a source for an even more radical critique of society and of the ways in which domestic and caring labor, the female body, and nature itself are devalued and ignored (Young, 1985). At the same time, while embodied motherhood is given a powerful place in gynocentric feminism, biological fatherhood holds little meaning. Gynocentric feminists tend to reduce the richness of the human relationships that comprise families and to promote a rather stark ideal of unaccompanied motherhood or motherhood as a personal, independent, unfettered choice and activity. In short, where humanist feminists have striven for personal autonomy and entrance into male-dominated institutions, gynocentric feminists celebrate women's maternal role as a way to mount a wider-ranging critique of these institutions. Neither group spends much time asking about the complex relationship between gender equality and the demands of birthing and rearing offspring. And neither group spends much time asking about the roles of wider social institutions from motherhood to parenthood to marriage to congregational life.

In the last decade, one group of feminists did begin to give more attention to the needs of children with decidedly mixed results for feminism: conservative pro-family feminists. Progressive feminist Judith Stacey (1986) coined this descriptive label and it reflects her critique. She is justifiably worried that conservative pro-family feminists, such as Betty Friedan, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Germaine Greer, jettison core beliefs and politics of the women's movement by affirming gender differences and by repudiating sexual politics that have shown sexual relations to be oppressive socio-politi-

cal constructions (see Elshtain, 1981, 1990, 1993). Progressive feminists refuse to place the good of family and societal preservation ahead of the good of women and enter the family discussion as advocates of family diversity. At the same time, progressive feminists tend to obscure the fine line between openness to diverse forms of the family and advocacy of random, unstable ambiguities in family life. Stacey herself is quite willing to tolerate the gross ambiguities of the postmodern family—the “multiplicity of family and household arrangements that we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently in response to changing personal and occupational circumstances” (1990, p. 17)—despite the problems for children and adult alike.

With secular humanist and gynocentric feminism and with conservative and progressive feminism we arrive at a series of impasses. Neither conservative or progressive feminists seem able or willing to envision a social policy supporting both two-parent families and single mothers or gay and lesbian parenting. The empowerment of one, it seems, means the disempowerment of the other. And neither humanist nor gynocentric feminists seem able to envision gender and sexuality as a complex mix of biological and social elements, either seeing sexuality and families as social constructions or seeing sexuality as largely non-malleable, biological qualities with a universal, cross-cultural character. In the tension between these two positions we reach a stalemate sometimes characterized by name-calling. So we have Stacey, who advocates “Brave New Families” of fluid, diverse, reconstituted combinations, calling Elshtain a “new family value crusader” and Bethke Elshtain accusing Stacey of “ideological stalking” (Stacey, 1994, pp. 119-22; Shore, 1996, p. 29).

FEMINISTS IN RELIGION: A PATH THROUGH THE IMPASSES

So what about religious faith? When the early women’s movement condemned Christianity for lending religious sanction to male superiority and female submission, for the most part feminist theologians in the 1960s and early 1970s agreed with this critique. Religious reinforcement of sexism was contested on at least three fronts: male God language and ideology; the exclusion of women from religious vocation and reflection; and the religious sanction of subordination of women and mothers in the home. Initially, feminist theologians used the tactics of secular humanist feminism to challenge exclusive language, secure ministerial positions, and dispute male headship in the family.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, the feminist project in theology shifted significantly from a critique of a male-dominated Christianity to a reconstruction of its positive meanings based on a women-centered perspective. As early as 1981, Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow ob-

served that particular faith traditions within feminist theology offer "a possible path beyond" the tendency toward dualism present in contemporary secular feminist theory. Perhaps because feminists in religion "have been forced to grapple with historical images of women," they generally have not found either rejection of women's body experience or exaltation of it an attractive path (Plaskow, 1981, p. 57). As a test case, Plaskow attempts a feminist theological analysis of pregnancy and motherhood to demonstrate the indivisibility or inseparability of body and mind, and body and freedom. Intricate human relationships are mediated through the flesh and yet are always culturally interpreted. Where many secular gynocentric feminists have tended to underscore the opposition between the oppressive social institutionalization of motherhood and the positive natural experience of motherhood, the choice is not between institution and experience or "between patriarchy and nature" but between "oppressive institutions and institutions that are life-enhancing" (p. 65).

The systematic theology of Roman Catholic feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) provides another example of an attempt to move through the impasses of secular feminism. She has consistently called for the revitalization of a Christian feminist voice on the family. Ruether herself has the most systematically developed history of the family in Christian thought even though she is little known for this. One of her most significant contributions is her ability to identify extremes and argue for a mediating or transforming position. *Sexism and God-Talk*, one of the first full-fledged feminist theologies in 1983, contests the very nature of the impasse that arises between humanist and gynocentric feminist theory. She declares both the liberal feminist idealization of the male sphere *and* the romantic feminist idealization of the female sphere misplaced from the perspective of the Christian paradigm of alienated or fallen human nature. She desires a more comprehensive vision that encompasses liberal feminist ideals of civil rights, socialist feminist ideals of economic independence, and radical feminist ideals of the value of female self, body, and reproduction (Ruether, 1983, pp. 216, 109).

On what grounds does Ruether propose this vision? Both authentic human nature (in its unalienated original potential) and the revelation of Jesus confirm a fundamental egalitarianism at the heart of reality. Christian feminism requires neither a call to androgyny nor a proclamation of feminine virtue but the assertion of humanity. The promotion of the "full humanity of women" is the critical principle of feminist theology. Genuine humanity requires balancing male tendencies toward independence and female tendencies toward relationality with the opposite qualities. Ruether's ideal is an eschatological wholeness that transcends gender stereotypes, synthesizing and transforming male and female characteristics. She retains a place for the

biological family. But it is an ambivalent place because women have been considerably oppressed by claims about female biological destiny. Still, Ruether's goal is not the equality-as-sameness of liberal, humanist feminism, but rather "affirms genuine variety and particularity . . . a mutuality that allows us to affirm different ways of being" (Ruether, 1983, p. 7).

But Ruether does not go far enough in developing an adequate theory and practice for families today. More recently, my own work on the family in Protestant feminist theology and on developing a feminist maternal theology introduces what might be characterized as slightly more gynocentric concerns about the mother's voice and shared responsibility for home and children. Resurrecting the stalled revolution of gender justice involves challenging an economic and social system that views children, home, and community life as "non-work," that views market labor as almost completely independent of the labors of family and community, and that brackets the needs of children. Genuine change for women, men, and families means recognizing motherhood and domestic matters for their critical place in human survival and for the real hours of labor that they entail. It even means finding feminist values in motherhood in its many diverse shapes and forms without thereby returning women to motherhood and marriage as singular, viable, exclusive careers. But ultimately, from a theological perspective, survival of women in families and the sustenance of families at large means challenging conventional ideas about "the Christian family" and reconstructing new religious family values and practices of love as mutuality, equality, and justice.

Broadly speaking, white, middle-class feminist Christian theologians have worked harder to promote the feminist view that the patriarchal family no longer has a place than actually to identify alternative Christian family models. The conversation is even more sparse when it comes to the role of motherhood. Many theologians are mothers, and advocate maternal God imagery and language, but few have investigated in any depth what is learned about Christianity from this pivotal life experience. Few have made the complex intersection of work and family a primary topic of theological research. Hence I initiated a careful study of the complex relationship between Christianity, Christian feminism, mothers, families, and work.

Western theology and society have yet to recover from the likes of the author of First Timothy and the damage perpetuated in Paul's name. But fresh interpretations of scripture and traditions regarding women's roles within families are finally beginning to have some impact. Women, Timothy declares, shall neither teach nor have "authority over a man." The very order of human creation dictates that women follow men, and in the fall, Eve, not Adam, was deceived. If there is salvation to be had, it is "through childbearing" (I Tim. 2:11-15a). These ideas about female silence, sinful-

ness, and the sanctity of childbearing have done their share of damage. No wonder some feminists have done away with Christian notions of family values and with the value of motherhood altogether. But, contrary to the impression given by the religious right, Christianity has not just endorsed male dominance and the patriarchal family as the Christian norm; it has also acted to liberate women and has itself created precedent for gender justice and women's equal worth within families and societies. Among the many scriptures and traditions, biblical theologians offer fresh readings of both the creation stories in Genesis as well as the stories in the gospels of Jesus' ministry and women in the early church in particular. On both accounts, women are neither subservient nor submissive to men's and God's will but are distinctive and full participants in the events of creation and redemption.

A few feminist theologians, like Christine Gudorf and myself, use maternal experience as a powerful tool to better understand theological categories of love, justice, redemption, human nature, and sacrifice. Significantly, a classic essay, written in 1958 at the very beginning of second wave feminism, represents a powerful exception to the general antipathy toward biological mothering in early feminism. Valerie Saiving begins her article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," by plainly stating, "I am a student of theology; I am also a woman" (Sailing, 1960, p. 100). Sailing has seen, she implies, some problems that men have traditionally overlooked. Her redefinition of sin as involving self-loss as much as pride and of love as requiring self-affirmation as much as self-giving should be recognized and remembered for priming the pump of a thirty-year period of revision and reconstruction in theology. And it is, I believe, her own maternal experience that furnishes the ground for a revelatory breakthrough in the nature of self-love and agape. Although she never claims so directly and few other feminist theologians tend to notice, implicit in her essay is a third qualifying phrase, "I am also a mother."

Women face an entirely different set of temptations, Sailing argues, that male theologians have seldom understood. Rather than prideful, self-assertion that disregards the needs of others, mothers become so immersed in attending to external needs that they commit not the sin of self-centered will-to-power, but the sin of self-loss. Women's sin is better understood "as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center for focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition . . . in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self" (p. 109). Then, Sailing suggests something scarcely put forward as a religious ideal of salvation for mothers thus far: the moments, hours, and days of self-giving must be balanced by moments, hours, and days of "withdrawal into, and enrichment of, her individual selfhood if she is to remain a whole person" (pp. 108-9).

More recently, Gudorf (1985), a Roman Catholic ethicist, uses her experiences of mothering an adopted two-year-old who could not walk, talk, or eat, and a five-year-old who could barely walk, dress, or wash himself to argue against inadequate understandings of Christian love or *agape* as unconditional, self-disregarding self-sacrifice. As she discovers through her own investment in mothering, Christian love must involve a measure of necessary self-love that actually enhances our capacity to give. All love involves sacrifice, but ultimately aims at the give and take of mutuality. Moments of sacrifice, including Christ's sacrifice on the cross, are "just that—moments in a process designed to end in mutual love" (p. 186).

Maternal experience, I have argued, is a powerful tool to better understand theological categories. United States feminist theologians and churches alike must reevaluate the current value systems which reward material productivity but ignore the work needed to raise the next generation. My book, *Also A Mother* (1994), makes four moves in this direction. It attempts: (a) to dispel the deadly silence that surrounds what it means that mostly women mother; (b) to correct both the tendency to trivialize on the one hand or to romanticize on the other what it really takes to raise a child in a complex, technological post-modern society; (c) to expose and correct inadequate psychological theories of human fulfillment, economic theories of work, and theological theories of love and vocation that emphasize material productivity, discount the entire structures of women's caring labor that undergird the economy, and continue to promote self-sacrifice as an ultimate value; and finally (d) to recognize that the domestic burdens about which I speak are not mine alone. Many women and some men face similar burdens with fewer material and relational resources than I do. Ultimately, however, feminists must move beyond a critique of motherhood as an oppressive institution and towards an understanding of mothering as a revelatory and valuable activity. For, with appropriate caveats about the dangers of romanticizing and idealizing both mothers and children, it still might be argued that the "sacred appears powerfully, precisely in the midst of stewardship of the home, in embodied nurture, and in holding up the world" (p. 157).

Although it may be true that secular feminists have been more successful in undermining patriarchy than in developing alternative family ideals, those addressing and struggling with current family dilemmas should not neglect the important contributions of feminists in religion. Religious feminists offer viable ways to address the impasses of secular feminism and the family debate. In contesting the idealization of female self-sacrifice, feminists in religion have focused on an ethic of radical mutuality, even if only a few have applied it specifically to family relations. Moreover, feminists in religion have repudiated conventional dualisms which place blame

for family crises on either cultural individualism or a materialist, capitalist economy, or which understand sexual roles as either purely natural and universal or purely socially constructed ideology.

Whereas many secular feminists develop family norms in an historical vacuum, religious feminists believe that sexuality and family are so entwined with religion that attempts to change either must begin with religious traditions themselves. Furthermore, theological feminists point out to secular skeptics that there are various prophetic streams of thought in Judaism and Christianity that contest conventional norms of male dominance and suggest models of radical equality. Feminist theologians identify several critical religious convictions which have important implications for women, men, and family ideals: the conviction that Christian and Jewish traditions are important sources of empowerment for contemporary families, despite their male-dominated and male-defined narratives and symbols; an emphasis on the creation of women in the image of God and hence our inherent worth as partners and co-creators in life; a demand for egalitarian relationships of love, justice, and shared responsibility within family and society; a call for redefining religious doctrines of love, sexuality, sin, and redemption; and a sensitivity to individuals and groups that have been relegated to the margins of social existence. These themes receive different interpretations among various religious feminists in conservative and liberal circles, but the presence of them is pervasive. They suggest important new norms for women, men, children, and families.

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