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## **Contested Feminisms: Women's Religious Leadership and the Politics of Contemporary Western Feminism**

### *Abstract*

Feminism, a relatively recent social movement of radical reform, emerged from the mass political movements of democratisation, secularisation and liberalism that swept across the western world from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The first wave of organised feminist political action was articulated in the abolitionist, temperance and suffrage movements in America and Europe in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and culminated in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 in New York State where the women's rights movement was born. Religion was a crucial influence in the work of first wave feminists enjoying close ties to the liberal movements of Protestantism, particularly the Quaker movement. However, as modernity progressed into the twentieth century and secularism became incorporated into statecraft, the influence of religion in the public sphere waned and humanist ethics came to the fore in political life. So, although Christianity had been a primary part of first wave feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the 1960s second wave feminism embraced secularism and situated religion as an inherently patriarchal institution, incapable of social change. This article looks at the legacy of first wave feminist Christianity and the souring of this relationship with the rise of second wave feminism. I argue that contemporary secular feminism has yet to acknowledge the pivotal part that women's religious leadership played in establishing the grounds for contemporary feminist politics, and further, devalued the work of religious feminists seeking reform in their organisations. Yet the work of these feminist organisations resulted in significant and lasting theological, cultural and institutional change in many religious organisations. A case study of second wave feminist Christian groups in Australia from the 1970s to the 1990s will provide evidence of counter hegemonic, radical political action in transforming gender conservative religious institutions, theologies and social practices towards a more inclusive religious culture.

### **First Wave Feminism**

"...the secular women's movement is the child, the grandchild, the great-grandchild of a movement inspired by devout Christian women concerned initially to right the wrongs of others."

Muriel Porter 1995: 221

Contemporary western feminism, both secular and religious, was borne from the abolitionist, suffrage and temperance movements of the 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that swept across Europe and North America enacting colossal political struggles to bring universal citizenship, inclusion and freedom to a number of disenfranchised groups, including women, working class men and enslaved African Americans. The historical struggles surrounding the expansion of citizenship rights to those other than white men has been documented widely by

feminist historians (see Phillips 2004) and as Phillips argues the early quest for sexual equality and rights continues into contemporary times.

In its earliest forms, first wave feminism called for equality between the sexes and focused on the rights of women and girls to education (Porter 1995: 210). Mary Wollstonecraft's famous essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792 is typically positioned as the first articulation of the case for the universal education for women and has become a central text of the feminist canon.

In Britain, America and Australia, many of the women who fought for human rights in the abolitionist and suffrage movements belonged to Christian churches and often came from clerical families (Porter 1995: 210-211). The Quakers were especially active in pursuing social justice agendas. Some of the most articulate speakers against slavery and poverty were Quaker women, including Lucretia Mott, Susan B Anthony, Elisabeth Fry and Jane Addams. Sarah Grimke and her sister Angelina are most often credited with beginning the American women's rights movement which emerged from their work on the abolition of slavery (Porter 1995: 211). For the Grimke sisters their Quaker faith was the springboard for their social justice work and this was made possible because Quakers have a long history of the affirmation of women as spiritual leaders and speakers (Porter 1995: 212). Elizabeth Cady Stanton championed suffrage rights for women in America and was instrumental in organising the Seneca Falls Conference of 1848 where she presented a Declaration of Sentiments that led to the formal establishment of the suffrage movement. Working with a committee of women Cady Stanton published *The Women's Bible* in 1895 (2013) which was effectively the first published feminist interpretation of biblical commentary and which established the gender bias of mainstream theological discourse.

In Australia, the battle for suffrage and women's rights began earnestly in the 1890s and was granted in principle by Federal Parliament in 1902 one year after the Australia was federated and a national Constitution enacted (Oldfield 1992: 18). Many supporters of the suffrage cause were Christians and women suffragettes included a number of prominent Christian women (Oldfield 1992: 28). Catherine Helen Spence (Swain, 2014) was a vocal supporter of women's suffrage in South Australia and was the first woman to stand (unsuccessfully) for political office in the South Australian parliament. She was also a theologian and preacher in the Unitarian church. Like Spence, Vida Goldstein (Wright, 2014) devoted her life to campaigning for the rights of women including suffrage and she was the first woman to stand for the Australian Senate in 1903. She founded and was involved with numerous organisations concerned with the rights of women and authored some of the early important documents articulating the conditions of women's lives. She also helped found the first Christian Science Church in Melbourne where she practiced and preached.

While we can see that women who were acting for reform in the public sphere tended to also advocate for religious reform of their faith organisations, it was also the case that women emerged as figures of religious authority in their congregations. For example, the first woman to be ordained in the state of NSW,

and the second in Australia was Joan Hore. She was a member of the Congregationalist Church of which some congregations were quite progressive in advocating for social reform. From the early twentieth Century the Church allowed the ordination of women, self-governing church communities and full liberty of conscience (Conway 2015). Hore graduated from the University of Tasmania and in 1919 moved to Sydney to work as an English teacher in a private girls' school where she introduced debating classes, which was then considered something of a radical option for girls. In 1931 she was ordained into the Congregational Church at Speers Point, south of Newcastle, before moving to other parishes in the Newcastle area (Conway 2015). Her focus was understandably on running welfare programs to relieve the deprivations of the Great Depression. By the mid 1930s she had returned to Sydney to work and evidence from O'Brien (1994) and Conway (2015) both suggest that Hore followed a radical social agenda that included caring for the poor, opposing war and educating girls. It brought her into conflict with other more conservative members of the Congregationalists and she moved parishes on a number of occasions.

These important religious roots of the early feminist movement in Australia have been poorly documented, despite a growing literature on feminist historical research, resulting in a weak understanding of the role that religion played in ushering in the rights of women and the struggle that religious feminists engaged in to achieve inclusion in state and Church structures. It is important to note that Christian feminists fought two patriarchies: the male state and the male Church hierarchy, and this produced for women a number of problematic contradictions and political impasses (Sands 2008; Porter 1995).

It could be argued that the changing cultures of early twentieth century Christianity were in part a result of first wave feminists' reform agendas across sects, denominations and churches. This can be seen via the beginnings of the inclusion of women in Church leadership positions, including ordination and preaching. First wave feminists were active not only politically, but also as Christian women who sought to radicalise their faith and church as well as political structures. They understood that religious tradition and public institution were both subject to the same historical and political contingencies in which change could be effected. For these women, the alliance between faith and social action was a non-issue - their faith was the rationale for their political involvement and their morality was based on Christian principles. Social activism had a theological dimension - their agendas for change covered structural, literary and symbolic dimensions of women's lives (Porter 1995).

First wave feminism understood that the rights of women must be won across the cultural and institutional spectrum and that women's public authority could verifiably be premised on their religious ideas and faith. The work of these early activists was highly contested in both wider Christian culture and secular politics. Indeed the idea that women should have the rights of suffrage was counter to the Enlightenment thinking of the time that positioned men as cultural agents and women as belonging to the sphere of nature, reproduction and child care. However, there is evidence that suggests that some religious

groups, as noted above, did provide women with opportunities of religious leadership and many traditions recognised the spiritual efficacy of women, for example in sainthood (Carey 1996: 112). In Catholicism, the religious authority of lay women was recognised in the domestic sphere, but men held sway in the public realm (Massam 1996).

Despite this argues Swain (2014), women sought leadership positions in a variety of ways, many women found religion a source of empowerment that prepared them for leadership, whether it was given or not, and often this involved an interpretation of 'key religious texts in terms of equality and empowerment which led them to develop a starkly oppositional stance to dominant interpretations' (Swain, 2014) As well, orders of women religious enjoyed significant independence and growth throughout Australia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While being bound by a conservative theology of obedience, it was also the case that women religious were leaders in education and social welfare and some, like Mary MacKillop, refused to be bowed to Episcopal agendas (O'Brien, 1992).

It seems that a more obvious response to the issue of gender inequality in religious organisations, is to understand religion as a particular kind of social institution, whose histories, theologies and contingencies require specific analysis. As Shurlee Swain (2014) suggests:

Religion generally has functioned to legitimise rather than challenge existing gender hierarchies, constructing men as leaders and women as nurturers. This construction predominantly shaped the opportunities for leadership for women within the religious sphere and continued to curtail their participation in key leadership roles throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Second Wave Feminism**

'...feminist secularism, like all ideological secularism, is wilfully amnesiac about its religious history.' Kathleen Sands 2008: 318

By the time second wave feminism began to emerge in the counter cultural movements of the 1960s, church membership numbers, as recorded in the Australian Census has radically declined and secularism as a principle of public life was firmly established. Church was no longer a central part of the lives of families and women in particular (Carey 1994: 113). There are complex reasons for this – both national and global - which are discussed at length by a number of historians as noted by Carey (1996 especially Chapter 5) but for the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the growing strength of secularism as both an ideology and a public value to articulate national character and foster a collective sense of the public sphere as free from the influences of religious belief.

By the 1970s when feminists began organising for reform in the churches, membership of religious groups had dropped to less than sixty percent of the total population (Carey 1996: 114) and religion was of little national interest (Singleton 2014). The ideological elements of secularism positioned religion as

an innocuous, atavistic and staid tradition that had failed to modernise (Goldenberg 2014). This was assisted by a number of influential social thinkers including Freud, Weber, Durkheim and Marx who had argued that religion had met its evolutionary end and would diminish and fade away with the growth of modernity. This scenario devalued and essentialised religion and established the grounds for a split between secular and religious feminisms, the impact of which, affected the efficacy of reform agendas in both religious and secular arenas. It was particularly damaging for religious feminists as they fought to change church culture from within, and without the support of secular feminism (Tulip & McPhillips 1998: 266). As Muriel Porter describes:

Christian feminism, which does rightly and properly seek the renewal of the churches, has remained loyal to its origins as a movement that sprang from the religious convictions of women who sought to serve God and humanity, but were denied vocations because of their gender. It deserves respect as a movement that has figured strongly in the struggle to free women from entrapment (1995: 223).

Having said that, the rise of second wave feminism was momentous in ushering in social change agendas around women's participation in public life, health and reproductive issues, the politicisation of domestic life and the rights of women and children. Early accounts of the oppression of women in Australian society by feminist authors such as Germaine Greer, Jocelyn Scutt and Anne Summers appeared in the 1970s and galvanised thousands of women into lobbying for programs of political change that would acknowledge the impacts of sexism and ensure the rights of women were enshrined in law.

Second wave feminism also had a significant impact on Christian women and specific forms of feminism emerged from women's struggles to transform sexism in the churches (Tulip & McPhillips 1998: 265). A rich field of feminist theological discourse developed from women struggling to make sense of their faith in a patriarchal church. Women mobilized into church-based social movements that effected lasting change in particularly, the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches. One of the earliest groups, Christian Women Concerned (CWC), formed in Sydney in 1968 with women coming together from numerous denominations to 'break the voicelessness of women in the church and publically speak about their concerns' (Tulip & McPhillips, 1998: 266). They produced a magazine *Magdalene*, which was published from 1973-1987 and provided an important forum for the articulation of women's experience in patriarchal churches:

Much of their analysis was directed against the institutional church. While the church and Christianity had played a formative role in the development of their religious experience, these women now felt pain and betrayal. They realised that their deep sense of inadequacy was a product of the dehumanising and misogynist constructions of women in the institutional practice of Christianity and the theologies and structures of the church (Tulip & McPhillips 1998: 266).

The public work of this group led directly to the establishment of the Commission on the status of Women of the Australia Council of Churches in 1973 and it was the work of this Commission that paved the way for the upsurge in

feminist activism in the Churches in the 1970s and 80s. Important new groups formed including the Movement for the Ordination of Women (Anglican), the Women-Church Movement (ecumenical), Women and the Australian Church (WATAC - primarily Catholic), Feminists in the Uniting Church (FUN) and the Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW). Issues of ordination, liturgical language, participation in liturgy and church administration, access to positions of religious authority, and theological education were uppermost. These agendas were parallel with the reforms that feminists were fighting for in the secular world: changes to law, equal access to education and jobs, reproduction rights and the recognition of domestic labour inequities.

However, building alliances between secular and religious women's groups was often fraught with secular feminists arguing that religious organisations were largely incapable of social reform and persuading religious women to leave. Many did, and pursued reform outside of church. But as Kathleen Sands notes the failure to come together meant that secular feminism was often unable to acknowledge the progressive social vision and outcomes of Christian feminist work:

[G]iven its ideological secularism, second-wave feminism failed for a long time to build alliances with the second wave of religious feminism that from the 1960s on had been reborn both in academic and religious institutions. In seminaries and universities, feminists criticized and often reformed misogynistic religious symbols and teachings; in religious institutions they worked for women's ordination and liturgical reforms; and in both contexts religious feminists advocated for women in the wider society. (2009: 318-9)

As argued above, secular feminism seemed somehow to forget that religious organisations and traditions were subject to the same set of social and political contingencies that all social formations – including feminism – are bound to. That is, in representing religion as an unchanging, monolithic form, it participates in the mystification of religion as something 'other' to cultural life (Goldenberg 2014). This ideological dimension of secularist philosophy continually positions religion as an unchanging tradition. Sands (2009:326) argues that when feminists deploy religion in the public sphere it needs to be within a discourse that acts to historicise religion and position it as a cultural formation where tradition is seen as dynamic and characterised by processes of conflict and change. Such a discourse:

Demonstrates concretely that those cultural formations we call religion, like the cultural formations we call government – or for that matter those we call feminism – are complex, ongoing, historical traditions, traditions of conflict and change. (Sands 2009: 326)

There were of course occasional strategic alliances between secular and religious feminists and a growing understanding by both movements that spirituality could be imagined outside of patriarchal institutional contexts. This was particularly assisted by the emergence of spirituality as a discourse of social practice and knowledge from the 1990s and fanned by movements of globalisation, migration, consumerism and the continuing demise of religion as

culturally meaningful to Australian citizens (Singleton 2014: 81-101). However the impact of ideological secularism blinded feminism to its potential for deeper alliances and reform work. An example of this can be found in the work of literature scholar Elaine Lindsay (2000) whose book *Re-writing God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction* demonstrated that expressions of spirituality had been evident in the work of Australian women writers for many years, but lay unacknowledged and unexamined by secular feminist literary analysis.

## **Reform and Radicalisation**

A closer look at the main feminist organisations in Australian Christian churches from the 1970s clearly demonstrates the contingent nature of both religious organisations and feminist religious reform and it is clear that these were dynamic organisations with histories of contest and change. At a general level the reform movements (MOW, OCW, Women-Church, WATAC, Uniting Church FUN) can be positioned as counter-hegemonic to the often-conservative practices of Anglicanism and Catholicism in particular. At a more specific level, feminist organisations held different positions on issues and were engaged in vigorous relationships with each other, often challenging and opposing agendas, theologies and positions (Tulip & McPhillips, 1998: 265). For example, membership of groups such as WATAC, OCW and Women-Church often overlapped, but there were dissenting voices which were critical of some of the positions and agendas of specific groups. For example WATAC was established in 1984 by the Catholic religious orders of men and women and was intended originally to engage Catholics in encouraging the inclusion of women in Church life and raise awareness of discrimination against women (<http://www.watac.net>). It later became ecumenical and is still active in 2016. It is positioned within the church whereas the Sydney Women-Church group deliberately positioned itself independently to any formal church and formed associations with other feminist religious groups such as the Kol Isha Sydney Jewish women's group and the Orthodox Christian women's association, and was far more adventurous in exploring ritual and liturgy beyond the confines of traditional liturgical forms (Tulip and McPhillips 2008: 268)<sup>1</sup>.

Sydney Women-Church was established in 1985 by a group of women who explicitly wanted a space outside of Church influence. It followed the formation of Women-Church groups in the USA in the early 1980s and over the next 15 years the international movement produced an impressive body of literature, hosted international and local events and supported the formation of a feminist politics of religion in the public sphere. Women-Church has been defined by a number of prominent activist-scholars notable Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Sandra Schneiders, a prominent US Catholic feminist suggests this:

Womenchurch defines itself as a church, ie as a community of religiously engaged and motivated people who are women-identified. Their starting point is the

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these innovative rituals are documented in the journal *Women-Church: An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*



experience of women, not any particular institutional religious tradition, although the movement originated among Catholic women moving beyond the goal of ordination into a self-understanding as an exodus community...from patriarchy. Their goal is the full personhood of women...(1991:101).

Over the years that the Sydney group was active, it produced a bi-annual journal (1987-2007), met monthly, created and performed rituals that reflected the lived embodied experiences of women, re-imagined the language and imagery of divinity through art and literature, participated in numerous public protests, held seminars and retreats and supported members in their various quests for change. They occasionally participated in public protest. For example, in 1995 during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Australia members of Women-Church penned a Protest Creed and took it down to Hyde Park to read as the pope drove by in his Popemobile<sup>2</sup>.

During the 1990s MOW, WATAC and Women-Church organised a series of national feminist theology conferences, which brought together hundreds of women hungry for intellectual, practical and ritual re-invention. While the conferences were an important gathering point, the more radical agendas of including women from non-Christian feminist religious groups, Aboriginal women and Goddess groups were subsumed to the bigger issues of women's ordination and liturgical change (Tulip & McPhillips 2008: 269).

From the 1980s feminist theology developed apace across the USA, Europe and to a lesser extent Australia, providing innovative women-centered interpretations of biblical texts and historical evidence as well as contesting the structures of Church organisations and the dominance of patriarchal clerical cultures (Tulip & McPhillips, 2008: 268). The publication of *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* by Harvard scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in 1983 became a vital text to Catholic women in particular as it established clearly the important role that women had played in the early Jesus movement. Jewish, Christian, post-Christian and Goddess feminists produced a rich field of religious imagination and brought that to their congregations and women's groups. In Sydney, women battled for changes in Jewish synagogue practice and this led to women reading from the Torah, marking religious festivals for their daughters and eventually ordination (Tulip & McPhillips 2008: 268). Feminist theologies were themselves often contested and interwoven with other projects of social change especially involving issues of race, ethnicity and class politics.

In 1992 a new association called *Women Scholars of Religion and Theology*<sup>3</sup> was founded which had a brief of bringing together women who were working, researching, teaching and living in the Asia Pacific region. The Association held three conferences in Australia and New Zealand and founded a journal called *Seachanges*. This journal, which is managed by four academics, is still active and

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<sup>2</sup> Erin White (1997) A Protest Creed in *Women-church: An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wsrt.asn.au/>

has recently published Volume 7 with essays by postgraduate students across the region. This demonstrates a small but on-going interest in women and religion.

While reform within the churches centered around increasing participation levels for women at parish and administrative sites, changes to liturgical language, as well as developing women's leadership capacities particularly via the ordination of women, some religious organisations failed to move to a more inclusive gender agenda. For example, in the 1970s, the Presbyterian Church gave women religious rights such as Ordination, but then later rescinded them in 1995, leaving ordained women in a complete quandary (Tulip & McPhillips 2008: 267). Women in the Catholic Church continue to be stymied by a male clerical elite that was entrenched in keeping women out of positions of responsibility and power (Schneiders 1991). The Vatican resists the push for change and continues to promote a limited role for women in Church leadership, despite the fact that in local churches it has become increasingly clear that although women cannot be ordained, they are active across leadership roles at parish and diocesan level, particularly in the face of decreasing clergy levels and decreasing lay male participation. Even in Uniting and Anglican Churches where ordination has now been commonplace for well over 20 years, recent studies show that there remain significant issues of marginalisation and mistreatment of women clergy (Bouma, 2014, Thompson, 2014). As Janet Scarfe states, changing the rules was not akin to changing the culture (2014:52).

### **Feminism and Post-Secularism**

In recent years women's counter-hegemonic voices in the church have become dulled and the issue of women's rights sidelined in church politics. The Women-Church organisation has folded, OCW has closed and the MOW group maintain a small presence mainly in the Anglican Church. A small group of WATAC members continue to meet in Sydney. With the advent of ordination in most Christian churches, the politics of women's religious rights have shifted away from women's religious leadership to debates about the role of women in the family and workforce and with continuing falling numbers, the future of the Church as a viable organisation.

It is likely that there are complex reasons for this. The rise of third wave feminism shifted the focus from social change to identity politics and this coincided with the rise of neo-liberal politics, which champions the rights of individuals but shies away from social groups as the central force for social change. A post-feminist backlash in the early years of the new century affected the trust of young women and led to the idea that feminism was no longer needed as the rights of women had been secured in the 1980s and 90s. This relates to both an ideological anti-feminist thrust and a poor understanding that the rights of women as articulated in the first and second wave women's movement are relatively new and still highly contingent. The emergence and popularity of evangelical fundamentalist Christianities such as Hillsong has reinforced traditional gender roles with religious leaders across a number of conservative denominations emphasising the theology of headship. Many would

argue this is a backward step for women's rights (see Baird 2015). The clerical sexual abuse issue which rose to public notice in the 1990s has had a significant effect on delegitimizing the moral authority of churches, indeed religion, and further eroded confidence and trust in the ability of religious organisations to ensure the safety of children.

Conservative politicians such as John Howard and Tony Abbott have tied gender conservatism to religious values and sometimes enacted them in policy. In this new landscape of neo-liberal capitalism religious organisations may be declining in terms of traditional membership but growing in economic and political clout. In particular, the outsourcing of social policy in education, employment services, health, aged care and disability services to mostly Christian organisations means that many religious organisations exercise significant levels of political and economic power.

The idea that secular feminism held onto - that religion was hopelessly patriarchal - has certainly been weakened. This may be partly due to the fact that there is now a large literature written mainly by religious feminists demonstrating clearly the contingent and historical nature of religion and its institutions. Many battles have been won, and issues of gender equality remain part of the public agenda which the Churches cannot ignore. For example, in 2016 this is likely to be centred on the marriage equality debate with most mainstream Christian groups taking a conservative stance.

The mobilization of feminist social action is crucial to the articulation of areas of current discrimination against women in employment, equal pay, domestic politics, violence against women, reproductive health and marginalisation in religious organisations. In this continuing work, there are two issues that need to be addressed. The first is to dissolve the ideological dimensions of religion/secular in feminist theory, which will relieve the tension between so called religious and secular feminists, and re-orient attention to the treatment of women across all institutions. The second is to describe, analyse and politically mobilize the multiple narratives of alternative political movements in religious traditions. In effect, feminism needs to challenge the idea of tradition as only one voice and the story of one people and open this up to multiple, contested voices. This will make visible the feminist traditions already present in faith traditions, as well as the way in which the state mobilizes tradition for its own political purposes. While this has been an ongoing project of religious feminists, other feminist groups have not adequately appreciated it. In a very important way, first wave Christian women provided a model for political engagement that might be useful for feminist struggles today.

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