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Christian Feminism: Women Pastors and Feminism

Amanda Slowinski

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Introduction

Christian feminism is a belief system, ideology, and an identity of feminism that combines Christian beliefs with feminist theory. Using the methodology of oral history, I interviewed two female pastors in southern Minnesota. I wanted to know how they dealt with issues such as women's place in the church, abortion, sexist behavior, sexuality, gender roles, the gender of god, and inclusive language while being a pastor. I also investigated why the two women I spoke with either chose to identify themselves as a Feminist or not. I analyzed the interviews using theoretical perspectives from Christian feminist, feminist, and religious texts to show the relationship between Christianity and feminism, as well as why one would or would not identify with Christian feminism while being a pastor.

This project was something that has interested me for quite sometime. I am a Christian, and I also identify myself as a feminist. I was not sure where in the branches of feminism I actually fitted in. Also, before this project, I did not know or meet anyone who claimed both of these identities. I thought talking to these women would help with my personal journey, to figure out where in the realm of feminism I wanted to be. I also was not sure if there were other young women like me wondering if it was okay to be Christian and a feminist at the same time. Thus, shedding light on this issue was done to help not only myself but also others like me. While this oral history project does not attempt to reflect the views of all feminist Christian women, the purpose of my research was to obtain a fuller understanding of Christian feminism.

Literature Review

Histories and Theories of the Connections between Christianity and Feminism

Many scripture readings from the Bible have been used to connect Christianity and feminism. Feminist Christians use these to further support their beliefs. One of the main readings used is the creation story “and God created them male and female, in God’s image God created them” (Genesis 1:27). Christian feminists will argue that the previously stated scripture reading meant men are not to rule over women. They are equal, both in God’s image. Cochran (2005), the author of *Evangelical Feminism, a History*, also pointed out that in this creation story responsibility is given to both men and women to care for the earth together, stated in the next verse. Again, equality between men and women is shown. Some Christian feminists also try to prove that some scriptures have been misinterpreted so they reinterpret the stories with a woman’s perspective. The writings of Paul are very controversial, especially the reading from I Corinthians 1:11 “...the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God...” This reading is not feminist because it states men rule over women. However, one needs to keep in mind that many people wrote the Bible at different times. One should not take the bible so literally. People wrote the Bible, not God, unless proved otherwise. Many Christian feminists agree with this. It has male influence and male dominance as well, so the stories most often look down upon women.

Christians indeed can be feminists. A magazine started in 1975 called “The Daughters of Sarah” “described themselves in this way: We are Christians; we are also feminists. Some say we cannot be both, but Christianity and feminism for us are

inseparable” (Cochran, 2005, p. 33). The two ideologies are a part of their selves, their identities. Rachel Larson, whom I interviewed, also expressed the same feeling; it is hard to separate the two. One should not ignore the feelings and beliefs they have. Christianity and feminism both identify some women. It is not a myth; some women are not just one or the other. Black and white does not exist in this situation, only grey.

The article “Christianity and Feminism: Do they need each other?” by Ursula King tries to define feminism and Christianity, and then show that both of them work together. Feminism is very broad; one should almost say “feminisms” instead of just feminism. A general definition of feminism could be the study and attempt to diminish oppressions of gender, race, sex, and class. However, many people have different ideas about how to implement change, so there are the different branches of “feminisms”. There are liberal feminists, radical feminists, and Christian feminists. The list could continue on and on. King (2004) describes feminism in her article and says “I simply mean the modern women’s movement in its different phases....it aims to establish women’s freedom from all kinds of oppression and bondage” (p. 195). One could use this definition, or the one I gave, or you can even make up your own definition from your experiences.

In the conclusions of King’s article, she sums up why Christianity and feminism need each other. “The vision of feminism empowers many women today, and Christians must recognize that the great feminist themes of liberation, celebration and community are also the central themes at the heart of the Christian gospel.” (King, 2004, p. 205) This defines what Christian feminism is about; it is meshing the two ideologies. They both hold the same values; they feed off of each other in most cases. Both of these articles

gave me the knowledge I needed to understand what Christian feminism is and how the two ideologies connect.

Spiritual Leaders' and Society's Attitudes about Feminism and Feminist Issues

The attitudes of spiritual leaders and society about feminism vary, as could be expected. Spiritual leaders in this case would mean women pastors or nuns. When looking specifically at women who were pastors Lawless (2003) points out in *Transforming the Master Narrative*, “Although many women are reluctant to use feminist language in reference to what they are doing...their endeavors are feminist to the core” (p. 61). Women who are pastors are breaking the male domination that was established in the Church many years ago. That seems radical, which leads one to assume that their act is feminist, since radical women have been associated with feminism in the past.

However, not all pastors actually identify as feminists. One young pastor, Stephanie Howland, in *A Clergywoman of the New Generation: Evolving Interpretations of Gender and Faith*, does not identify as a feminist. “I don't think that there are any huge gender inequities in my situation” (Albee, 2000, p. 462). She heads three different churches while attending seminary to finish her degree. I feel that Stephanie Howland is one of those women Lawless refers to; they will not call themselves feminist but their actions are.

Some spiritual leaders do identify themselves as feminists, or support Christian feminist advocacy. Merfeld conducted five in-depth interviews with nuns around the Mankato, Minnesota area for her thesis of *Sisters in the Struggle: An Ethnographic Study of Feminism in U.S. Women Religious*. The research was done through the method of ethnography and kept a feminist perspective throughout the entire study. Her main

research question was “Must Catholicism and feminism be adversarial entities or can the two ideologies co-exist and even nurture each other?” (Merfeld, 1992, p. 1) Most of her questions were about women’s issues, and she also brought the concept of feminism to the interviews. All of the nuns’ experiences were different; however their attitudes towards the issues and towards feminism were all echoes of each other. They either supported feminism, or were feminists themselves. Merfeld concluded that the two ideologies can indeed exist together. Those five women strongly felt that Catholicism and feminism need each other; they believe they feed off each other.

This study has great relevance to my topic because I am looking at women, religion, and feminism. Then if you organize Christianity into denominations, the study involves the Catholicism denomination. Even though the pastors I interviewed are both ELCA Lutheran (a different denomination), Christianity is still the main religion I am researching. I used Merfeld’s transcripts as models for the types of questions I wanted to ask. Her questions were very feminist oriented, which helped keep mine feminist as well.

Society also has strong attitudes towards feminism. The majority of attitudes seen are through negative stereotypes. To obtain some of those views I found a few webzines; they seemed to portray more of an actual perspective from a random person in society than an article from academia. Feminism is not always welcomed, as Cosh (2006, p. 1) said “the mere mention of feminism evokes rolled eyes or an indulgent chuckle.” Stereotypes are thrown at feminists that they are all man-haters, lesbians, pushy, bra burners, and so on. Society claims these labels are negative. I am not speaking for society as a whole, but that is the majority of what is discussed implies, whether it is through the

media or just casual conversation with ones peers. These attitudes then may cause some to hesitate identifying as feminists for fear of having the stereotypes directed at them.

Methodology

Why would a female pastor identify as a Christian Feminist? The best way to answer the question is through the method of oral history. I interviewed two women who are pastors. One does identify as a Christian Feminist, the other hesitates to use the word feminist or feminism. These interviews will be the main source for my information. I wanted to compare and contrast their experiences and reasons for being or not being a Christian Feminist. Because further research is needed, I used many books and journal articles from Christian Feminist, feminist, and religious points of view to provide a background of the relationship between Christianity and feminism.

One source I found was “Sisters in the Struggle: An ethnographic study of feminism in the U.S. Women Religious” by Carolyn P. Merfeld. Even though she used an ethnography method, it was still useful to me. When looking at the interview transcripts, I was able to see the types of questions she asked, which helped formulate my questions. For example, Merfeld (1992) asked “How did you become a feminist? Was it a natural transition?” and “And what are your feelings on the abortion issue and the Church?” [80, 85] Her questions are open-ended; however, they will not be satisfied with a simple yes or no. I asked the women in my own project about their growing up experiences and things that related to Christianity. Some of my questions were: When did you decide you wanted to be a pastor? Why did you choose this profession over others? Do you think inclusive language is important in the church and society? Why? I also wondered if the women were feminists, if they were, then I asked them how they defined their feminism.

I touched on many areas that many feminists advocate such as homosexuality, equal pay, sexism, abortion, contraceptives, etc. I asked these questions because I wanted to see if they were like the women Lawless (2003) talked about in her article *Transforming the Master Narrative*, who do not say they are a feminist, but act like one.

In oral history, researchers conduct in-depth interviews with just a few respondents. In my research, I only wanted to talk to two different women. Oral history gave me the detail that I wanted for good qualitative research. It is also a good way to give voice to those who are not usually heard. Women in general need to speak up to have a say in many issues. In women's studies classes, Christian feminism, in my experience, is rarely discussed. It needs a voice too. Since oral history is an excellent way to do that, I felt it was the right choice. Oral history is also a great way to practice active listening skills. It is important for one to "hear the story of others, not just the words, but also the spaces between words, the meanings, the process of meaning-making, the emotion, and even the silence" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p.159). That was important in my interviews as well. I received body language, moral language and meta-statements that could reflect what was or was not being said when I asked certain questions.

The components of oral history are something you can not get from a random survey. Surveys would be very impersonal, and would not work with my research question. I wanted to know these women on a more personal level than just knowing their gender, age, and whether or not they are a Christian Feminist. Focus groups would not fit well either, as they are used with many participants. While the method uses in-depth interviews; it is also usually combined with quantitative research. I only had two participants and I wanted to use qualitative research. Ethnography would be useful for my

question, but usually a longer time frame is needed for that, which I did not have.

Therefore, it can be seen that oral history was the best choice for my research.

Oral history and feminism as Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2007) points out “extends beyond the inclusion of women’s knowledge and study of oppression and also speaks to the way feminism conceptualizes experience” (p.154). Thus, oral history and feminism allows me to show the experiences of both pastors. Each experience is different because of their family, education, friends, and their own beliefs. My research, using oral history, is feminist because I gave voice to the women I interviewed. Oral history is also a way feminists can compare women’s experiences with something to men’s experiences. I did not research that, however, to see the similarities and differences between male and female pastors could be something worth looking at.

With any type of research, there are bias or certain things that affect the results. Since the interviews become so in-depth, I may have gotten too involved in the conversation and forgot to write notes or notice the moral/body language and meta-statements. Some information may have been lost during the interviews. Another problem could be that my findings did not seem very diverse. I am a middle class, white female who interviewed other middle class, white females. I did not choose that, it just happened. It may have happened because of the limitations I have of finding women to interview in and around Mankato. I do not have the means or a large enough time frame to find more diverse women in say the Twin Cities. The experiences of these women might be different than they would be for women of other races, ethnicities or denominations. There is also a problem “between giving voice and authority to our narrators and using our feminist lens...” (Hesse- Biber & Leavy, 2007, p.169). I needed to

know when I used her voice and not just my opinion. I could have finished my research and found out one of the participants did not like how I presented their experiences. They have control over that; it is their story, not mine. So changing things to make the results acceptable to my participants is an option and could still happen.

Analysis and Interpretation

My question was: why or why not would a female pastor identify as a Christian Feminist? To answer this question I interviewed two women, Elaine Siemsen and Rachel Larson. Siemsen says she is not a feminist. “I don’t call myself a feminist....I don’t consciously worry about whether I’m a Reconstructionist feminist or a conservative feminist. I’m a Lutheran, I’m a Christian, and I’m a woman.” While she says she is not a feminist, there are instances where she agrees with what could be perceived as a feminist perspective. Siemsen is supportive of modern contraceptives. She said:

I find myself in good convergence with my denomination that God created scientists and gave them brains and expected them to use those brains, and that the purpose of science should be to both glorify God and to preserve and bring justice to the lives of individuals.

Siemsen personally is open to people of all genders and sexualities as well. She noted that her denomination is also welcoming. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people (LGBT) are not allowed to become pastors in her denomination if they are in an open relationship.

She believes women have the right to equal pay and know from personal experiences that women are discriminated against because of their gender, in society and at the work place. An example of that would be when she interviewed for an associate

pastor position Siemsen said, “he cancelled the meeting the morning they were to vote and he called me up and told me he was canceling the meeting because he decided I could not be a pastor and a mother at the same time.” Even though what he did was against the law, he did not feel it mattered. She was also turned down by another pastor simply because she wrote a book. She was very agitated at this point in the interview, I could clearly tell she knew she had been discriminated against and thought it was wrong.

Siemsen also feels inclusive language is important in society and in the Church. “One has to be able to see oneself in god.” Women cannot do that if God is always said to be strictly male, or by using the words Lord, and King. Other words can be used to make the interpretation more open, like Christ, God, or Holy Spirit. However, I am not saying whether or not God is male. I am only talking about alternative words that could be used instead of using all male pronouns.

All of these responses from Siemsen seem like feminist perspectives. But she told me she is a “theological packrat”; she takes what she likes and leaves the rest. She, for example, can agree with a feminist perspective but not actually identify as a feminist. Why? I believe deals with the stigma that seems to be attached to the word feminism. “..There are those evangelical Christians who put feminism right up there with child molester and sex offender or anything else.” She does not use the word because people misunderstand it and perceive it as a bad thing. How can something that tries to improve conditions of and/or end oppressions be bad? I do not have that answer.

Rachel Larson, the other pastor I interviewed, clearly stated that she is a Christian feminist. She made a comment about being a woman pastor in general which goes along with the point Lawless made, Larson said, “As we worship and I lead them in worship,

that's being feminist as far as I'm concerned." Being a woman pastor is acting like a feminist. Larson also commented that Feminism connects with Christianity. She said "True Christianity is one that has a feminist perspective." However, she pointed out however, that the institution of church is not feminist, true Christianity to her does not include the institution overseeing everything. King's comments on the major feminist themes being in the Christian gospel could support this. Larson agrees that you cannot have one without the other.

When I asked Larson about sexuality and how she or the church deals with it, she gave me the same reasons as Siemsen. Her denomination welcomes LGBT people, but they do not allow them to be ordained unless they vow celibacy. Larson pointed out that this was very disappointing to her. There is a hope for a sexuality social statement to be passed by 2009, according to Larson. This statement is not law in their church, but more like a guideline.

Larson, like Siemsen, believes inclusive language is very important to use in society and while in Church. She said "It creates who we are and our communities." So she felt it was her responsibility to use inclusive language. Larson also noted that not every Christian Feminist has the same ideas about inclusive language. Some like to use words like father/mother God, other people just take out him, or Lord and use other words like Holy Spirit, the same kinds of words Siemsen talked about. Others do not even like the Jesus figure because he is male, so they take that out too.

We also talked about the stereotypes of feminism and how they influence people, especially Christians being able to say they are feminist. Larson told me about an instance on her campus where she preaches, "One of our religion professors gave a

homily in chapel the end of last semester and relayed that several young women are really afraid to claim that they are feminists, which is an F-word to people”. This relates back to what Cosh said in the webzine F-Word, feminism is not always welcome, it is seen as something negative. Larson wanted to help these young women; she thought it was horrible that they were afraid to accept who they were by not showing their true selves.

I found a few things to be similar in both of the women’s stories. While growing up, they both had strong role models who showed them they were important and that they could do anything they set their mind to. Siemsen had a grandfather who encouraged her to pursue anything she wanted, even when people said she should not because of her gender. She told me he was very important to her and helped shape her personality. Larson said her mother was a role model for her. She was a nurse, and one of the few working mothers in the area where they lived. She showed her she could be a working mother if she chose to. Both women also were second career pastors. They went to school for other careers before deciding to go to seminary. Siemsen was in secondary education and Larson was in nursing. What seems ironic to me is that both of these careers are ones that more women obtain, but both Siemsen and Larson decided to change to more male dominated careers, being pastors. This, to me, is something a feminist would do.

So one woman pastor is a feminist, the other is not. Larson is comfortable with feminism; she does not shy away from the word because of what others might think. All of her responses in the interview proved this, she was confident every step of the way. However, she did say she will not go out of her way to use the word. If it is brought up, she will explain what she means to help the other person fully understand. Siemsen picks

what she wants from feminism but does not actually identify as a feminist or use the word feminism. She is a Reconstructionist theologian. I believe it is because of the stigma, the fear of what might people say or think about her. They could jump to conclusions and start to tear down feminism, while applying negative comments to her. This is something that needs to be changed. It is wonderful that some people within Christianity like Larson can overcome the stigma, but something needs to change so that others, if they wanted to, could as well.

Action Statement

To overcome the stigma attached to feminism, society needs to change, not just a few people. It is something that women have been working for already, along with women's rights, homosexual rights and other various activisms. The major problem is it that change cannot happen overnight. Something needs to be changed, whether it is the image, the actual word feminism, or the way feminism is presented through awareness.

The image of feminism most commonly known, thanks to the media, is the bra burning, man-hating, lesbian woman. These obviously are all stereotypes. Not every feminist hates men; there are not only homosexual feminists, but heterosexual ones as well! They can be traditionally feminine or have more masculine qualities, such as "tom boys". There are young and old feminists. You can even go as far as saying that men can be feminists, though some would debate. The point is, anyone can be a feminist. There is not one type of person, like the stereotypes imply. Feminism is a positive thing, never have I heard or seen feminism doing something that hurts anyone or anything. Feminism as stated in my literature review means many things to many people. One specific definition does not exist. Each woman or man makes the definition for him or herself.

This wonderful information needs to be received by the rest of society, especially those who do not fully understand what feminism is or could be. I am concluding that awareness has already been raised within feminist communities from the articles found in webzines like F-Word. However, awareness outside of the feminist “bubble” also needs to be raised. Consciousness raising groups could form again. They seemed to work well in the 70s, so why not now? They could occur in the work place, church organizations, PTA meetings, colleges in conjunction with campus Women’s Centers, fitness centers; anywhere that someone can communicate with others in the society to inform them about feminism. A great example of this is the action taken to help Larson’s issue at Gustavus Adolphus College. To assure the young women they can be feminists if they want to while being Christians, they formed a book group to read and discuss Christian feminist books and ideas. Public Education could also include Women’s History or classes about feminism in their curriculum to inform young adolescents and teenagers about feminism.

I believe if the negative image of feminism were to change, more people in society would toss out that stigma that has continued to be attached to feminism. It would be more accepted, and fully understood. Siemsen even stated, “If the stereotypes of feminism were gone, then yes, I would be a feminist.” Women would not be afraid to identify as feminists, no matter their situation. Whether they were a business woman in New York City, or a pastor in a small town, women could confidently exclaim if they chose to, “I’m a feminist!”

Conclusion

The purpose of my research was to understand why a female pastor would or would not be a feminist. Siemsen is not a feminist because of the stereotypes of feminism. If those stereotypes were gone, then she possibly would identify as a feminist. Larson is a Christian feminist. She feels Christianity and feminism connect in a clear way. She embraces both identities and has encouraged other women to follow her example.

I think more research should be done with other women pastors since I only spoke to two of them. More women need to be represented in this issue. If more pastors agree with these two women, then my conclusions would be supported even more. It would also be interesting to see the differences between dominations within the Church, as well as the age of the pastors, location and race of the pastors, which would add diversity to the project. This was not able to be done with my project because of my limited resources as an undergraduate college student. That would bring diversity to the project. Research could also be conducted to compile the attitudes of feminism that male pastors have. It could be important since most women, if they are associate pastors, work with senior pastors who are men. It is very rare to find both positions filled by women. The male pastor's perspectives would be impertinent to accepting women pastors who are feminists.

Doing this research was a messy experience, like any other research, however towards the end, everything seemed to make sense. I learned that I am a feminist researcher; I can use feminist methodology to achieve my goals. As stated in my introduction, this project was also a journey of my own to see where I fit in the realm of

feminism. Now, at the end of this project, I can say I think of myself as a Christian feminist, or a feminist Christian. Larson and Siemsen shared their lives with me, and during that, I realized I agree with most of what they said. They helped me find the light at the end of the tunnel, while recognizing that there is still a long way to go to diminish the stereotypes of feminism.

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Author biography:

Amanda Slowinski is a sophomore at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is a Women's Studies major and French minor. She grew up in Forest Lake, MN and currently still lives there. Her family consists of three sisters along with her mother and father. Some of Amanda's interests are: reading, biking, singing, dancing, photography, spending time with her family and relatives, and spending time with friends. Amanda became a Women's Studies major because she felt a connection after she took an introduction class. She felt she shared the same concerns that Women's Studies has about social justice issues. Women's studies seemed like the best major to give her great opportunities. This research project Christian Feminism: Women Pastors and Feminism was not only an important project for the class WOST 330 Feminist Research and Action, but it was a personal journey for herself. She did not know where in the realm of feminism she fit. Amanda knew she was a feminist, and she also considered herself a Christian. She wondered if Christian Feminism even existed. The message she received from society was that they cannot exist together. This project was a journey. She found that she agrees with everything that Christian Feminism encompasses. She now considers herself a Christian Feminist. Christian Feminism is a topic she would like to continue to learn about and research, as well as issues about gender and the roles society has assigned to them.

Faculty mentor biography:

Jocelyn Fenton Stitt is an assistant professor of Women's Studies at Minnesota State University. Her research interests include the intertwining of the familial and the imperial in the British Caribbean from the nineteenth-century to the present and feminist mothering. She teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses on Global Feminism and international issues. Sarah Turbes and Amanda Slowinski were students in her course Feminist Research and Action in Spring 2007.