

CHRISTIANITY
TODAY

How the Feminist Establishment Hurts Women

A Christian critique of a movement gone wrong.

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Last year the producer of National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* called to invite me on the program. The network was doing a show on "Take Our Daughters to Work Day," with Marie Wilson, director of the Ms. Foundation for Women, as a guest. The producer wanted my perspective as a lawyer and M.B.A. who had decided to become a full-time mother.

I welcomed the opportunity. "Take Our Daughters to Work Day" was a good idea, I said on the program, to the extent that it inspired our daughters to work hard, aim high, and strive for excellence. Yet it failed to address what concerns women most today.

Mothering, I reminded Marie, is a difficult job. Every day I discipline, teach, and inspire my children. Every night at dinner my husband and I take time to ask our children to name a good thing they did that day. We strive to build a strong Christian faith in them and encourage them to develop Christian virtues. I know it will take years of devoted effort like this to reach my goals as a mother.

Over the past several years, I noted, I have talked with women from many backgrounds and walks of life. When the conversation has turned personal, I usually hear the same words: "I'm scared for my children and their future." Do these women worry that society will block their daughters' career

advancement? I do not think so, though I know from personal experience that women often face greater obstacles to their success than men do.

Something more profound troubles me and the women I talk with: the environment in which our children are growing up, and the moral, cultural, and social deficit they are going to inherit. But who, I asked on the air, speaks for women like me, women who—whether they work or not—believe their primary duty is to their children? Clearly, society's most pressing need at the moment is not more lawyers or accountants. What we need, I said, is more decent people, of the kind only strong families and dedicated parents can produce. We need people of character—self-controlled people who know right from wrong and are committed to the common good. The women I know want their daughters to become such people.

Marie agreed that parenting is important. But she quickly made clear that her idea of parents and mine were quite different. Mothers like me, she suggested politely, are passé. For the twenty-first century, we need something new—a "multi-parent" society. I suggested this seemed a tall order, since our society already has trouble assuring even one parent for each child. Time ran out before Marie could answer. What struck me about the exchange was that Marie and I spoke different languages. We disagreed

markedly in our assumptions about what it is to be a human being and a citizen in a democracy, and about the nature of the good life.

HOW A MOVEMENT GOT OFF TRACK

As a woman and a Christian, I believe profoundly in equal rights and equal opportunities for women, and I am deeply grateful to the women whose tireless crusade opened the voting booth, the universities, and the board rooms to women. Eighty years ago, women could not vote. Today they can. Forty years ago, American women could claim no guarantees of equal access to employment, housing, education, or credit. Today their rights to these things are enshrined in law, and barriers of all kinds are crumbling in spheres of work and public life.

Clearly feminism, traditionally defined as equal rights for women, has played a major role in bringing women into full and equal citizenship. But while most women share feminism's traditional goals, today fully two-thirds refuse to call themselves feminists.

What explains this paradox? I believe the contemporary feminist movement has strayed far from the mission of classical feminism. The feminism of the Ms. Foundation, the National Organization for Women, and university women's study departments seems out of touch with the average woman's daily life and concerns. Many feminist leaders today dismiss a return to the home like mine as a throwback to the mythical days of June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson. Instead of "empowering" women, they actually create a victim mentality that debilitates them. In its radical forms, feminism purports to offer meaning and purpose it cannot give. Even worse, extreme expressions of feminism strike at the heart of orthodox Christian faith.

Sadly, contemporary feminism too often seems to be a chip on the shoulder disguised as a philosophy, an excuse to blame others for personal failures. How did the movement that has done so much for women get off on this self-defeating track?

To answer this question, I spent the last year reading the seminal books of the modern feminist movement. I discovered something fascinating: feminism's image of woman has changed drastically since the inspiring days of the suffragettes.

The founding mothers of feminism, who wrote from the 1840s to 1940, generally portrayed the typical woman as a capable, intelligent human being who knew her own interests. All she needed to make a contribution to society commensurate with her talents and energies was an even break—the equal rights and opportunities to which she was entitled. Classical feminism proclaimed that "biology is not destiny." Its uplifting vision, writer Cynthia Ozick notes, was one of "aspiration and justice made universal, of mankind widened to humankind."



Women go to work:
World War II feminized
the workplace.

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The writings of early feminists were addressed to and described women like my grandmother and great-grandmother, who were typical of their generations. They were strong, wise, resilient, and resourceful individuals. They never had the opportunity to go to law school, as I had. For a time in their lives, they could not even vote or serve on a jury. But they knew how to get things done, and done well.

My great-grandmother, for example, was widowed at a young age. After her husband died, she took her eight children to Colorado and homesteaded there as a single mother. She nursed four children who died before the age of 18. She worked hard, night and day, battling the elements to ensure that the children who survived would become honorable and productive citizens. In similar fashion, my grandmother raised five children almost single-handedly during the Depression. She started a business and drove her Model T 30,000 miles across the country to establish a chain of distributors. With the money she earned, she helped to send her children to college.

What made it possible for my grandmother and great-grandmother to accomplish so much, while facing hardship and discrimination of a kind few of us will ever know? They knew who they were, why they were here, and what they had to do. They had well-considered ideas about what the good life is, and they had the internal resources of virtue and character necessary to live that life. They were strong women, like the industrious woman of "noble character" praised in Proverbs 31. In their prudence, resourcefulness, and courage, they resembled biblical heroes like Miriam, Sarah, Deborah, and Esther, and heroes of the church like Susannah Wesley and Catherine Booth.

VICTIMS AND EMPTY VESSELS

Unfortunately, starting with Simone de Beauvoir's influential 1954 book *The Second Sex*, the woman of character like my grandmother seemed to disappear from the writings of many feminist intellectuals. In the feminist bestsellers of the 1960s and '70s—Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*—the image of woman as strong and capable was superseded by a new and radically different image. I call this new woman "the empty vessel."

In essence, the empty vessel of postsixties feminist theory is a timid, weak, and bewildered creature. She is defined by her suffering and victimhood. She lacks the internal resources to cope with suffering, to put it into perspective, and to distinguish between garden-variety irritation and real injustice. Easily threatened, she is only comfortable operating within the context of a group, a "sisterhood" of like-minded victims. Why is she so weak and vulnerable? Unlike my grandmother, she seems to have little idea of who she

is, what she believes, or how she should live.

Betty Friedan was one of the first to describe American women in the language of the empty vessel. In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan spoke of women as "empty," "infantile" creatures, lacking "a core of human self," "the 'I' without which a human being is not fully alive." In her eyes, the women of her generation were "anonymous biological robots," paralyzed by their "sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness."

Even if many American women lived artificially constrained lives in 1963, the year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made sex discrimination illegal, women have made extraordinary progress over the last 30 years. Yet influential feminist theorists continue to place the image of the empty vessel at the center of their world-view.

For example, in 1983—the year I graduated from law school in a class that was 40 percent female—Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* appeared. Steinem was a household name, an important and powerful woman who had founded *Ms.* magazine and served as president of the National Organization for Women. Yet her book recounted daily struggles to make herself "real" and overcome her nagging "feelings of non-existence." Steinem attributed her sense of emptiness and impotence to the fact that women are "psychic colonies . . . half-people" who have "no idea who we are, or who we could become, as whole, independent human beings."

The empty vessel remains the star of the show in the feminist bestsellers of the 1990s. Susan Faludi's 1992 *Backlash* reveals an author every bit as angry and alienated as Friedan was in 1963. (Indeed, Faludi dismissed Friedan—who had rethought empty vessel imagery in her 1981 book *The Second Stage*—as a brainwashed pawn of the Reagan administration.) In Faludi's eyes, contemporary women, whether investment bankers or astronauts, remain traumatized by a menacing patriarchal culture. Women, she claims, are still "blind to their own interests and abilities" and continue to "live in the shadows," groping "in the dark" for purpose and direction. Weak and confused as ever, they make the most important decisions of their lives on the basis of the "whispers" and "cajolings" of those around them.

As I read these books, I kept asking myself, How could my great-grandmother have saved the cattle from a prairie blizzard if she had been made of such stuff? I realized that the feminist movement's mission has shifted; much feminist theory is no longer centrally concerned with promoting fairness and equal rights. In its more radical guises, the movement has become a sort of quixotic, existential crusade to fill empty vessels by conjuring up for them an "authentic self." Once the empty vessel finds an identity, the



Harriet Nelson: Feminist nemesis?

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thinking goes, she will become what Gloria Steinem calls "a whole, independent human being." At last she will feel truly free, truly visible, truly real.

But there is a catch. Feminist thinkers warn that this authentic self will not come easily. In fact, it cannot emerge until the existing social order has been turned upside down. For radical feminism claims that women's supposed emptiness is caused by social institutions created by men, who seek to retain power for themselves by alienating women from their true, spontaneous selves. Consequently, women who wish to "make themselves real" must view social norms and arrangements with reflexive suspicion and hostility. This is what Germaine Greer meant when she declared, "All the baggage of patriarchal society will have to be thrown overboard. Women must explore the dark without any guide."

Radical feminism offers the empty vessel what she craves most: an identity. But it is a negative identity—what literary critic Lionel Trilling has called the identity of "the opposing self." The opposing self, wrote Trilling, is characterized by its "intense and adversarial imagination of the culture in which it has its being." It gains its sense of identity by indignantly rejecting everything the larger culture holds dear. Consumed by self-pity, the opposing self embraces "the great modern strategy of being the insulted and the injured."

Those who adopt the identity of the opposing self tend to be drawn to one another, forming what political scientist Paul Hollander has called the "adversary culture." By embracing utopian ideals that can never be satisfied, such people ensure that they will always have much to complain of. Radical feminism's utopian ideals offer some women what Hollander calls "the very attractive identity of the moral crusader." Though such feminists see themselves as "free thinkers"—principled rebels occupying high moral ground—in reality they remain dependent on the agenda of the larger culture, and merely react against it.

WHEN FEMINISM BECOMES RELIGION

The metamorphosis of feminism from a campaign for equal rights to an existential crusade has had a curious result. Too often, contemporary feminism holds itself out as a source of ultimate meaning for women. It claims to answer the fundamental theological question: "Why do we suffer?" For many, it has become a religion.

Prominent feminists have been forthright about this. Betty Friedan observed in 1983 that "at times the feminist movement was almost a religion to me." Feminist thinkers often show a special affinity for the language of being "born again." In a recent *New York Times* article, for example, activist Vivian Gornick described what she called her "conversion" to femi-

nism. She wrote that the feminist insight—that women are as “real” as men—“went into me like a laser beam. . . . It shed light and warmth. It healed and explained. It told me who I was in the world as I experienced the world.” Faludi’s *Backlash*, too, is peppered with religious imagery. She speaks of feminism as bringing salvation, as ushering in what she calls “the promised land of equality.” Not surprisingly, she portrays the alleged “backlash” against feminism in terms that Christians reserve for the Devil. It is a seductive and terrifyingly powerful evil force that “whispers in your ear” and fools you into thinking that you are acting freely, rather than under its influence.

Over the years, classical feminism, with its emphasis on fairness and equality, has proven an invaluable tool for women fighting discriminatory practices in our churches. Today most women—including those evangelical women who are resisting rigid and demeaning practices in the churches—find classical feminist principles to be a source of intellectual integrity and personal strength. But feminism in its religious guise—the sort of feminism that seeks to find ultimate meaning in the self—is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity, and it exerts an increasingly destructive influence in the church world.

Nowhere was this influence more evident than at RE-Imagining, a widely publicized feminist conference that attracted 2,200 participants from 49 states and 27 countries last November. RE-Imagining was sponsored by the Greater Minneapolis, Saint Paul Area, and Minnesota Councils of Churches, and underwritten by a \$65,000 grant from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA). Other mainline denominations, including the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the American Baptist Church, also provided funds.

RE-Imagining, declared its organizers, marked the dawn of a feminist reformation, a “Second Reformation . . . much more basic and important to the health of humankind than the first.” To render Christianity relevant to female experience, they claimed, we must “re-imagine all that has been passed on to us through two thousand years of Christian faith.” Rather than pursuing the Truth, RE-Imagining’s focus was on encouraging each woman to imagine “her own truth.”

The central task of conference participants was to “re-imagine God.” There was little room for the trine God of Christianity. In fact, Lutheran pastor Barbara Lundblad drew whoops and applause when she noted with satisfaction that “we have done nothing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Like several other speakers, “womanist” theologian Delores Williams scoffed at the idea of Christ’s atonement. “I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird



Susan Faludi

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stuff. . . . We just need to listen to the god within.”

The deity of RE-Imagining was Sophia, nominally the biblical spirit of wisdom. Sophia, conference participants were told, is “the suppressed part of the biblical tradition, and clearly the female face of the human psyche.” Prayers to Sophia named her as “our maker, creator God, mother and guide.” At the conference grand finale—the “Struggle for Transformation Ritual”—participants worshiped Sophia in a rousing service complete with milk and honey.

RE-Imagining was not about women seeking better understanding of the Christian God. It was about women seeking self-affirmation and searching for an “authentic identity.” Participants sought to coax out their hidden, spontaneous selves in many ways: “scribble writing,” belly dancing, and anointing themselves with red dots and bowing to “the divine in each other.” The aim of the conference, after all, was to “create that wonderful space where we are truly free to be ourselves.” In the “Ritual of Making Holy Time,” attendees were urged to “dream wildly” about “who we intend to be . . . through the power and guidance of the spirit of wisdom whom we name Sophia.”

Not surprisingly, many RE-Imagining participants seemed to conclude that the elusive self for which they hungered was, in fact, divine—what Delores Williams called “the god within.” The conference program left little doubt on the matter: “Sophia is the place in you where the entire universe resides.” Whether they knew it or not, conference participants were worshipping themselves.

What form did the authentic self conjured up at RE-Imagining take? First, regardless of title or status, RE-Imagining participants were encouraged to think of themselves as victims. After all, a person who feels empty finds it is easier to define herself by her weaknesses than by her strengths. Second, they were encouraged to view themselves primarily as feeling rather than thinking beings. They sought to “make themselves real” through emotive song, dance, and storytelling, rather than through the more demanding articulation and defense of ideas. Third, they were urged to think of themselves as social critics and righteous moral crusaders. Finally, they were encouraged to appropriate an identity by merging with the larger group. The outlines of Lionel Trilling’s opposing self are unmistakable.

I believe that most women do not see themselves as empty vessels in search of a self. But we cannot underestimate the seductive appeal of the image of the empty vessel, especially when it is promoted endlessly in mainline denominations and conferences like RE-Imagining. After all, it does not take much to convince most of us that the world does not properly appreciate us. We are always eager to believe that someone else is to blame for what is troubling us in our lives. And all of us are tempted

by that most human of failings, the desire to remake God in our own image.

FULLNESS FOR EMPTINESS

We must, however, resist the siren call of radical feminism. We must take every opportunity to convince women in our churches that feminism as religion is doomed to fail because it is built on sand.

How do we begin? We remind women that, as we learn new truths, we must take care not to forget enduring truths. And if we gain a new insight—that men and women are each other's equals—only to lose sight of the timeless truths about what it is to be truly human, free, and whole in Christ, we make a bad bargain indeed.

The paradox, of course, is that the good news, the Christian message that feminists are so eager to “re-imagine” or throw overboard, is, in fact, the answer to the pain their emptiness causes them. It alone can bring them real hope, real freedom, and humanity in all its fullness. The Christian worldview is intimately familiar with the experience of emptiness, with the despair and impotence that radical feminists—like all of us—seek to escape. We call this experience the human condition. Christians know the dark night of the soul, but we also know that self-glorifying rage will only plunge us deeper into the abyss.

Christians have an answer for the feminist who despairs because she does not know “who she is.” We say, “You are a child of God, made in God's image, as all of us are. But we are also fallen creatures in a fallen world. We are by nature limited, flawed, and rebellious.”

The feminist says, “But what am I supposed to do? I can't tolerate this emptiness and confusion. My anger compels me to reject the social institutions that are causing my suffering.” But Christians say, “Social arrangements may compound our suffering, but in the end we suffer because we are sinners. We are all called to relieve suffering and promote justice wherever we can. But we can never build Utopia, because salvation is not of this world.”

The feminist says, “My only hope is to see a truth that is true for me.” Christians answer, “There is such a truth, but it is universal. It has its source outside our flawed and limited selves. This is the truth revealed to us in the Judeo-Christian God, and in the person of Jesus Christ, who said to us, ‘I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.’ We can know this truth, and it will set us free. The early church father Augustine put it best: ‘Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.’”

RECLAIMING EARLY LESSONS

This articulation of the deepest sources of human identity can help women tempted by the image of



Gloria Steinem

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the empty vessel. But there are practical, common-sense lessons to teach as well, the lessons my grandmother knew by heart.

First of all, we will never be happy as long as we are preoccupied with self. Indeed, Jesus said we must die to self to have new life. My grandmother's identity grew out of a web of relationships and personal loyalties defined in part by mutual obligations and moral duties. She knew that the duties that arise from membership in a family or community are really pathways, not obstacles, to fulfillment.

I think Marie Wilson was perplexed by my choice to put my children first, and by my concept of motherhood as involving moral duties that simply cannot be passed off to others.

My grandmother was able to discern and carry out her duties under challenging circumstances because she made the cultivation of virtue and character the central task of her life. To her, being a “whole, independent human being” did not mean constantly taking her emotional and spiritual temperature. Rather, it meant becoming a grown-up.

What does it mean to be a grown-up? It means growing wise through experience and through empathy. It means being humble and admitting your mistakes. It means cultivating the very adult virtue of self-control. It means being resilient and good-humored. Being a grown-up means putting others' needs and interests before your own, when those others are dependent on you. Most of all, it means asking at all times not what is pleasant or convenient, but what is right.

As contemporary women, we are blessed with many advantages my grandmother did not have. We have the opportunity to develop our talents and use our skills in the full range of public life. Thanks to the dynamism of our country's political and economic systems, I no longer have to sit at home spinning thread, making soap, and scrubbing on my washboard to ensure my family's survival. If I work hard enough, I have a good chance of becoming a senator, maybe even President. I can become a chemist, climb Mount Everest, or dedicate my life to breaking the track records set by Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

Much has been given to us as women today, and much will be required of us. I believe we have a moral responsibility to reclaim the heritage of classical feminism's proud accomplishments, and the image of the woman of character that grows out of it. It is this image, this vision, that we need to put to work in our churches—and pass on to our daughters. □

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