# The Roots of Feminism

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The feminist movement has become such a force to be reckoned with in our society with its aim of advocating for women's rights and equality of male and female. There are many causes linked to this movement, and some of them are justifiable given the history and prevalence of abuse, harassment and devaluing of women. Even in a western society where women enjoy more rights than their foremothers, global statistics on the mistreatment of women and other related atrocities such as sex trafficking are staggering. Has the Biblical worldview on womanhood perpetuated the subjugation and ill-treatment of women? It is obvious that the Biblical view of male leadership and its responsibility to care and build-up has been distorted. Against God, His heart, and His ways, many have abused their God-given authority as a means to control and mistreat women, whilst others have mistakenly assumed that male leadership implies men are superior. It could be argued that this provides a rationale for all women to espouse feminist thinking and ideals and for the infiltration of the same into evangelical circles.

**However, the question begs itself, is feminism compatible with Christianity?**

To answer this question, this article evaluates the roots of feminism and reflect upon some of its key thinkers and their views of God and the Bible, its core ideas and spiritual associations. In a second article, Feminism & Christianity, we examine the Biblical worldview on womanhood as it relates to the design and roles of men and women and the practical outworking thereof.

## A Historical Look at Feminism & its Roots

Some believe that church history around the Protestant Reformation hints at the beginning of the feminist movement, with specific reference to Anne Hutchinson. Her theological assertions and teachings contributed to what is referred to as the Free Grace Controversy, which rocked the Puritan community in the 1630s. Although Hutchinson's teaching of the Bible and theology was initially only to women, men eventually sat under her teaching. Retrospectively, she has been hailed as a symbol of religious freedom, liberal thinking, and Christian feminism.

### Elizabeth Cady Stanton & Susan B. Anthony

The roots of feminism as a movement can be traced to the woman's suffrage movement of the mid-1800s, spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony, with the latter as the organiser/strategist and Stanton as the writer and thinker. Stanton is famous for her critique of the Bible, and the church in these words, "The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation." One of her greatest works is "The Women's Bible", and in her preface to its second edition published in 1898, she wrote, "Now, to my mind, the Revising Committee of "The Woman's Bible," in denying divine inspiration for such demoralizing ideas, shows a more worshipful reverence for the great Spirit of All Good than does the Church. We have made a fetich of the Bible long enough. The time has come to read it as we do all other books, accepting the good and rejecting the evil it teaches."[1]

Feminism gained traction in the 1960s as part of the civil rights movement and general anti-establishment mood which prevailed at that time. There is a connection between second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution of the early 1960s in what is referred to as Sex-positive feminism, which viewed sexual freedom as a major step towards the ultimate goal of women's liberation.  It is also interesting to note that it was the sexual revolution that led to the normalisation of public nudity, pornography, provocative fashion trends and the legalisation of abortion.

### Evangelical Women's Caucus

In the 1970s, feminism found expression in Christian circles with the formation of the Evangelical Women's Caucus in 1973, which amongst other things, proposed for the ordination of women and inclusive language in Bible translations. Thereafter emerged a variety of feminist schools of thought based on their view on the authority of Scripture. In her book, "Jesus and the Feminists: Who Do They Say He Is?", Margaret Kostenberger classifies three feminist stances, namely:

- **radical feminism,** which outrightly rejects the Bible and Christianity due to its supposedly male patriarchal bias;

- **reformism feminism** which rejects Christian traditions about women but uses the Bible to reconstruct women-positive theology;
- lastly, is **egalitarianism or Biblical feminism,** which affirms the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, although it argues that the Bible makes no distinction between male and female roles.

## Mary Daly

One of the leading thinkers of radical feminism is philosopher, academic and theologian, Mary Daly. Although she started as a Roman Catholic, she had a radical turn, as evidenced by her attack on Christianity in her publications. In one of her books, she advocates for the eradication of the divine patriarch from the human imagination. Daly viewed church doctrines as myths that resulted from patriarchy.  As an example, she argues that "The doctrine (of the immaculate conception) certainly can be read as an expression of the impotent priests' hatred of Female Power."[2] She then went on to write books in which she offers alternatives to what she terms a patriarchal construction of language and religious imagery. She urged women to unveil and liberate labels such as "hag" and "witch" and supplied them with chants they could use to free themselves from patriarchy. Daly described herself as a radical lesbian feminist and viewed her way of life as the only way women could rise above patriarchy. She's also famous for this quote, "If life is to survive on this planet, there must be a decontamination of the Earth. I think this will be accompanied by an evolutionary process that will result in a drastic reduction of the population of males."

## Other Leading Radical Feminist Thought Leaders

There are other leading radical feminist thought leaders, e.g. **Daphne Hampson,** whose belief trajectory went from Christianity to some blend of Christianity and feminism, and ultimately an outright rejection of God altogether. For example, Hampson believes that "feminism represents the death-knell of Christianity as a viable religious option."  Often these feminist leaders will go on to construct a self-religion that comprises of some form of feminine power and goddess energy worship associated with sensual spirituality, as evidenced by the works of Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. One can't help but observe how this correlates with the descent mapped out in Romans when humanity rejects God.

"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools,  and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the

Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature…" – Romans 1:21-26 (ESV)

Leading thinkers of reformist feminism include **Phyllis Tribble, Letty Russel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza**. Phyllis Tribble is a feminist Bible scholar with roots in the Southern Baptist movement. She emerged in the 1960s as one of the pioneers of feminist interpretation of Biblical texts by using the discipline of literary and rhetoric criticism. Trible challenged radical feminism's rejection and condemnation of Scripture and argued rather for feminist hermeneutics. She explained that "Clearly the hermeneutical task requires understanding the Bible as dynamic literature engaged with continuing experience. This understanding yields the thesis that in certain biblical texts faith embraces feminism even as it receives meaning from women."[3] In one of her books, Texts of Terror, she applies literary criticism and feminist hermeneutics to reinterpret tragic stories of women in ancient Israel and refers to feminist hermeneutics as a prophetic movement that examines the status quo, pronounces judgment and calls for repentance.

Another key feminist Biblical scholar is **Rosemary Radford Ruether**. Although, at first, her approach was reformist, her later work advocates going beyond Scripture as a basis for feminist theology. Her premise was that the Christian Bible precludes feminist theology and that "its texts, while incidentally preserving memories of women's experiences in their present form and intention they are designed to erase women's existence as subjects and to mention women only as objects of male definition. In these texts the norm for women is absence and silence."[4] Her book, Womanguide, thus offers a collection of texts that women can use as a starting point for developing a theological canon whose centre is women.

## Feminism Core Ideas & Its Spirit

Feminism advocates for women's rights, the elimination of gender roles and stereotypes, and the establishment of equal opportunities and outcomes for both men and women in all spheres of society.

Dallas Willard writes that "every idea system is present among us as a life force through a small number of powerful images." Of course, this makes sense when we consider the cross as an image of Christianity's core message of "self-denial", "servanthood", "dying to self", and "humility". Feminist ideology also becomes clear when we consider it in light of its representative images such as that of "girl power", a liberated woman or an independent/successful/powerful woman. Hashtags and slogans are also quite revealing.

Take, for instance, #BossLady which will often be accompanied by a write-up such as, "A successful, independent woman who knows what she wants in this world. She WILL NOT stop till

she is satisfied. She NEVER settles for anything less than everything. She speaks her mind in every situation …" A variation of poster slogans that are often touted at women's marches include:

"My mind, my body, my freedom."

"My body, my choice, my rights."

"The future is female."

What about the overtures of disdain for men, marriage and the nuclear family brandished by most feminist activists and writers? I quote (own emphasis added):

"**Since marriage constitutes slavery for women,** it is clear that **the women's movement must conce**ntrate o**n attacking this institution. Freedom for women cannot be won without the abolition of marriage."**– Sheila Cronan, Feminist Activist

"I feel tha**t 'man-hating is an honorable and viable political act,** that the oppressed have a right to class-hatred against the class that is oppressing them." – Robin Morgan, Ms Magazine Editor

**"The nuclear family must be destroyed … Whatever its ultimate meaning, the break-up of families now is an objectively revolutionary process. "** – Linda Gordon, Writer and Historian

There is also the portrayal of husbands and fathers as lazy, incompetent and stupid in sitcoms/TV shows and advertorial campaigns, which Sarah Peterson, a journalist, reflects on in her article titled "Dumbing down Dad: How media present husbands, fathers as useless."

Another poster that is a regular feature at women's marches is "We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren't able to burn." The witch is often cited to be a feminist icon. Kristin J Sollee, in her book titled "Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive", connects the dots when she writes, "Witches, sluts, and feminists are the trifecta of terror for the patriarchy … To me, the primal impulse behind each of these contested identities is self-sovereignty … witches, sluts, and feminists embody the potential for self-directed feminine power, and sexual and intellectual freedom." The phrases self-sovereignty, self-directed feminine power are quite telling. A writer on a website called religion news recounts her attendance at a witches' gathering and surmises, "Once a fringe spiritual practice, witchcraft has become a key, and increasingly popular, component of feminist political resistance." This explains the bizarre practice of hexing (a witchcraft practice) male figures associated with sexual assault (e.g. supreme court justice Brett Kavanaugh), which is now a trend at women's marches.

**Are these still part of the ideal of equality? Is feminism compatible with Christianity?**

## Egalitarianism or Biblical Feminism

This brand of feminism deserves a special analysis because of its prevalence within the evangelical church. It argues that if interpreted properly, the Bible teaches that men and women share authority (leadership) equally in the home, church, and world. It argues that although the Bible reflects patriarchal culture, it does not teach patriarchy in relationships, and there is no distinction between male and female roles. It bases this on the teachings of Scripture such as Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 5:21.  Egalitarianism, therefore, seeks to reform what it perceives as the "patriarchal nature of Christianity." To quote some advocates of this school of thought, "Our mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy." Egalitarianism is often referred to as the paradigm of mutual empowerment, and it points to the Trinity as the model of mutual empowerment.

What's interesting to note is that radical feminists well-versed in Christian beliefs (mostly theologians who were Christians at some point) reject this brand of feminism due to the view that egalitarianism, in its truest sense, as a paradigm of mutual empowerment, is not compatible with Christianity. Daphne Hampson, a lecturer and theologian who was mentioned earlier, makes a compelling argument, and Margaret Kostenberger in Jesus and Feminists summarises this argument as follows:

- Hampson rejects the Trinity as a model of egalitarianism. She argues that there's an element of hierarchy and dependence "with the Son submitting to, and depending on, the Father."
- In consideration of Jesus' life, Hampson argues that "Jesus did not challenge the secondary role women played in Jewish religion, and he accepted the prevailing male and female roles in his society." In fact, Hampson continues, "Jesus permitted a woman to sit and learn at his feet, but we 'have no picture of Jesus sitting at a woman's feet, learning from her'".
- Jesus (and Paul) may have been personally kind to women or even ahead of their time, but this does not make them feminists.

For the above reasons, Hampson concludes that God and Jesus are unusable as sources for the feminist paradigm of mutual empowerment. She then sets forth conditions that would have to be satisfied for the compatibility of egalitarianism and Christianity. Again, I borrow from Margaret Kostenberg:

- God must be one of us. He must be like us, for any form of power is excluded. Hampson says, "Women want to be whole, self-directed, free, and interdependent with others. They want a God who does not override their will and who is "non-dominative".
- There is also no need for the cross. Hampson denies any need for women to come to God in

dependence, weakness, or need. Women “have no use for a God who condescends to be with them in their weakness. Paternalism fits ill with feminism.”

- Hampson advocates for “a world in which power is not exercised, a world in which service and self-giving are reduced to a minimum.”
- “Everything that the cross of Jesus Christ represents—service, self-sacrifice, loving self-denial—is excluded from Hampson’s vision of egalitarianism …”

In this article, I have attempted to allow feminism to speak for itself in answering the question of compatibility with Christianity. I conclude this section with a profound thought from Margaret Kostenberger:

“In essence, feminism is whatever Christianity is not. It is self-actualizing rather than self-giving. It is assertive of its independence and autonomy rather than service-oriented … Feminism is all about (re)claiming power over self. It is strong rather than weak, and self-sufficient rather than dependent.”

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## References:

[1] https://archive.org/details/womansbible02stan/page/8/mode/2up

[2] Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy, page 104

[3] Biblical Theology as Women’s work, Phyllis Trible extract from Religion in Life publication, 1975

[4] Womanguides: Readings from a Feminist Theology  Rosemary Radford Ruether, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985

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Read **Feminism & Christianity** for the first part of this excellent article on Feminism.

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