

The Churches and Feminism in the 1970s

-- A Contradictory Relationship

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Abstract

The most five popular Christian churches in the 1970s are Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Mormons, and Presbyterian. In this paper, researches are done about the relationship between the Churches and the second-wave feminism. I will use direct quotations from the Churches and its followers during that time as well as some secondary sources to show that all the Churches mainly opposed the goal of the second-wave feminism during the 1970s. It's significant to understand their past relationship because both of them still play a large role in people's daily life, so people's opinions won't be easily influenced by the arguments of both sides.

Keywords

Feminism, the Churches, the ERA, equality, ordination, abortion, freedom.

1. Introduction

There are nearly 205 million Christians in the United States [1], so the Churches do play a significant role in people's daily life and influence their perspectives on specific social issues. Since the teachings of the Churches may affect people's opinions on social movements, it is crucial to understand the relationships between the Churches and vital social movements. Feminism, the advocacy of women's rights, always seems to have a contradictory relationship with the Churches throughout history. For instance, the Churches destroyed all their official records of their only female pope because women were not allowed to be an ecclesiastic. [2] There were no exceptions during the second-wave feminism. The Churches mainly opposed the goal of the second-wave feminism in the 1970s even though they showed some supports for women equality in abstract ways.

2. Context

The goal of the second-wave feminism during the 1960s and the 1970s was to increase women's freedom and equality rather than just having enfranchisement.[3] Unlike the first-wave feminism which just focused on women's suffrages, the second wave feminism brought debates to many more issues such as sexuality, family values, the workplace, reproductive rights, and official legal inequalities.[4] For instance, second-wave feminists believed that access to abortion would give women control over their bodies and their careers. Women also wanted to be in positions of different kinds of leadership roles like political leaders, administrators in companies, and priests in the Churches. The Equal Rights Amendment, one of the most significant works of the second wave feminism, is designed to guarantee "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied to abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" [5] These are the five most popular denominations in the USA at this time: Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Mormons, and Presbyterian. In this paper, I will draw on sources from the governing bodies of each of them to show that all of the mainstream Churches were opposed to second-wave feminism.

3. Literature Review

A great deal has been written about the relationship between the Churches and feminism before. Previous scholarship has given the impression that Christian women in the 1970s were either uninterested in second-wave feminism, or actively supported some forms of it, but my specific approach to the 1970s is a new one. To research the relationship between the Churches and feminism in general, historian Soquel Filice took us back to the Bible to testify that women should be silent in the Churches. Filice argues that Christian women were not major opponents of feminism and were not involved at all, but many religious women cared about the opposition of the Equal Rights Amendment. [6] This paper agrees with Filice's arguments that many Christian women opposed the Equal Rights Amendment as well. For instance, religious women in Illinois converged on the issue of the ERA, further complicating this binary narrative. [7] Unfortunately, Filice ignored the American Catholic Feminist Movement in the 1970s, the evidence that Christian women were active during the second-wave feminism. According to Seth Dowland, Christians were not initially opposed to feminism; in fact, they widely supported women to pursue equality in political, social, and economical ways. [8] It's not until Phyllis Schlafly convinced everyone that the ERA contradicted traditional Christian family values, and it was dangerous for women. Dowland used some quotes from Christian magazines in the early 70s and Schlafly's article about the ERA as evidence. However, the Churches' support for the second-wave feminism was very limited because they had distinct beliefs towards female equality, and they opposed many aims by feminists during the 1970s. Neither of their arguments thoroughly discussed the full relationship between the Churches and the second-wave feminism since both of them missed some critical aspects of the feminist movement. The limitation of Soquel Filice's article was not including the Christian women's involvements in the 1970s, and Dowland ignored the Churches' opposes to women's ordinations and abortions. In order to supplement the research, primary sources on Churches' opinions on women's ordinations and abortions shall be included in this essay. Overall, other scholars argued that the Equal Rights Amendment was a turning point of Churches' support towards the second-wave feminism. [9] Unfortunately, while Christians in the 1970s, like feminists, believed in the equality of women; they defined "equality" in such a way that it led them to oppose most of the concrete aims of the feminist movement. They refused to support women equality politically, women's full employment, and women's rights to choose.

3.1. The Churches' Supports Towards the Second-Wave Feminism Were All in Abstract Ways

The Churches did keep supporting women to gain equality in political, economic, and educational ways because of their traditions throughout history, but all their supports were only in abstract forms. During the 1970s, many Churches in the United States made official documents to support the second-wave feminism and promote equality within and outside the Churches. These official documents indeed had a positive influence on the second-wave feminism since it may convince many Christians that female equality was necessary. Historian Ann Braude supports this argument by declaring that not only the United Presbyterian Church in the US but also the American Baptist Convention passed official sweeping resolutions to call for their Churches to support women's equality within and outside the Churches. [10] The Churches agreed that women should be equal to men and treated without discriminations for a really long time. They just insisted doing that during the second-wave feminism as well. In 1976, the LDS Church officially declared, "The history of the Church clearly demonstrates the long-standing concern of its leaders that women, as daughters of God, should have without discrimination every political, economic, and educational opportunity" [11] The LDS Church announced that women are equal with men in the sight of the Lord, so the LDS Church believed that women should be treated equally as men. Historian Dowland also agrees that women were

equal and participated in the Church in the same way as men from the beginning of the Church. As a result, the Church must face up came up with a gospel that guaranteed women's equal place in the society as men did too. [12]

However, the Churches' efforts of supporting feminism in the 1970s only included announcing official resolutions to the public. They failed to do anything practical for the feminist movements. Moreover, not only the Churches itself but also their faithful believers both agreed that women should be able to pursue more equality than just suffrages. It's one thing to declare an abstract commitment to the equality of women in the eyes of God. The Scriptures are clear on that, after all. It is another to support the specific form of equality on offer in the second-wave feminist movement. Some Christians were willing to take that further step. Christian Today editor Harold Lindsell wrote "By now people inside and outside the church generally agree that women should have the same rights as men: equal pay for the same job; equal opportunity for positions generally limited to men; the right and freedom to pursue any career, to own and control property, to obtain credit cards, and the like" [13] And yet he was in the minority. Most Churches' supports to the second-wave feminism were very limited because they did not accomplish anything else rather than making official documents to support them. In fact, they opposed many feminist movements during the second-wave feminism.

3.2. The Churches and Their Followers Opposed One of the Most Important Works During the Second-Wave Feminism—The Equal Rights Amendment

The Churches and many conservative Christians opposed women's equality politically by disapproving the Equal Rights Amendment since they believed that it failed to recognize the biological differences between men and women, would undermine their existing privileges, and brought women more repressions. The Churches made it clear that they did not favor the Equal Rights Amendment by passing out official resolutions to argue against the ERA. They believed the ERA would undermine the stability of families. In LDS Church's First Presidency Statement on ERA in 1976, even though the LDS Church agreed to support women to gain equality in its first paragraph, they did not support the Equal Rights Amendment at all. They announced that "If the proposed amendment were to be ratified, there would follow over the years a train of interpretations and implementations that would demean women rather than ennoble them, and that also would threaten the stability of the family which is a creation of God"[14] The LDS Church believed that the Equal Rights Amendment would not be likely to bring women more equality and would ruin a creation of God, families, which the Churches valued. Moreover, although the Churches believed that men and women are equal, they indeed have biological differences. Therefore, men and women could never be treated in the exact same way. The LDS Church stated, "We recognize men and women as equally important before the Lord, but with differences biologically, emotionally, and in other ways. ERA, we believe, does not recognize these differences. There are better means for giving women, and men, the rights they deserve." [14] The Churches believed that the ERA was not the solution for women to pursue equality since it failed to recognize the differences between men and women, and women deserved a better solution to pursue equality than the ERA. The ERA would in fact lead to more repressions to women than benefits as the Church believed that "While the motives of its supporters may be praiseworthy, ERA as a blanket attempt to help women could indeed bring them far more restrains and repressions" [15] According to the Churches, the ERA did not accomplish to create any practical advantages for women. Many Christians also agreed with the Churches that the ERA would take away many women's unique privileges under the Christian cultures.

Even today, the Baptist Church is still opposing the ERA. In its annual meeting on Nov 7-8 2018, the Illinois Baptist State Association passed a resolution urging churches and their members to stand against the Equal Rights Amendment, because "the definition of sex used by the ERA

implies that sexual activity with a person of the same sex is morally equivalent to sex between a male and a female.”[16] It seems like the Baptists not only opposed both female equality and gay rights.

The Churches’ opposition to the ERA gained countless supports from its faithful believers. Like the official Churches, countless faithful Christians including female Christians also strongly opposed the Equal Rights Amendment publicly. Phyllis Schlafly, a devoted Catholic, believed that the amendment was “anti-family, anti-children, and pro-abortion”[17] She even created an organization called STOP ERA to call for Christians women to join her. In 1977, Schlafly even organized a national convention to oppose the ERA in Houston. The reason why she was so vehemently opposed to the ERA was that she thought the ERA would take away many special privileges for married women and ruined the stability of families. She thought women were already had more rights and advantages in society than men did. She argued, “Why should we lower ourselves to “equal rights” when we already have the status of special privilege?” [18] Schlafly believed that the ERA would take away many women’s privileges like “making women subject to the draft,” “abolish a woman’s right to child support and alimony,” and “the right not to take a job.” The ERA would bring many setbacks for women and ruined the lives for women by their children by undermining women’s financial security since “men must offer physical protection and financial support of his children and of the woman who bears his children based on our Judeo-Christian values.”[19] Schlafly believed that the ERA did not think well enough for married women who just wanted to stay home to take care of their families. Men were able to disobey the traditional Judeo-Christian values since they did not have to offer supports to women at all if the ERA passed. One of the reasons why the Churches and its believers did not support the ERA was because of Christian values and traditions, and it was also one of the reasons why the Churches did not support the freedom of full employment for women.

3.3. The Churches Opposed Women’S Freedom of Employment by Forbidding Women’S Ordination

The Catholic Church did not support women's right to full employment by strictly forbidding women to priestly ordination. They opposed biblical feminists who fought to pursue more voices and powers inside the Churches for more equality. The goal of the American Catholic Feminist Movement in the 1970s was to fight for women's rights to choose their careers inside the Churches, so women would be able to have more freedom to choose their careers. [20] According to historian David Bovee, Christians women founded different organizations to try to negotiate with the Churches' male hierarchical leadership to achieve more voices and powers for women inside Churches during the 1970s. By 1975, most Catholic feminists focused on the issue of women's ordination” [21] The Churches were male-dominated, and women did not have the freedom to choose to become an ecclesiastic as a career. Unfortunately, women's hopes were demolished in 1977 when the Vatican, headquarters of the Catholic Church, issued a declaration definitively prohibiting women's ordination: "For these reasons, in the execution of a mandate received from the Holy Father and echoing the declaration which he himself made in his letter of 30 November 1975, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith judges it necessary to recall that the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination”[22] Although the Catholic Church announced that they supported women equality, they did not act on it by promoting women's freedom of employment because of unbroken traditions throughout the history of the Churches. The Churches stated, "The practice of the Church, therefore, has a normative character: in the fact of conferring priestly ordination only on men, it is a question of unbroken tradition throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and the West, and alert to repress abuses immediately. This norm, based on Christ's example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God's plan for his Church” [23] The Churches refused to

change to adapt to the modern values; instead, they maintained their unbroken traditions since they believed that's what God wanted them to do so. The reason why the Churches supported feminism was because of their long traditions of promoting women equality, and the reason why the Churches opposed women's full priesthoods was also because of their unchangeable traditions. The Churches' decisions disappointed countless Catholic feminist, many of them "still considering themselves in the church, but not participating in its sexist institutions" [7]

The Presbyterian Church in America did the exact same thing to forbid women from holding positions of authority over men during the 1970s. During its 37th General Assembly of the PCA, its church leaders voted 446 to 427 against approving a study committee to examine women's roles in the denomination because church leaders were very afraid that appointing a study committee would eventually the way to women ordination. [24] Church leaders of the PCA also believed that the role of women is a certain issue already, so appointing a study group would be unnecessary. The Presbyterian Church's opposing attitude towards women's full employments since they refused to let others determine whether women's full employment was essential or not.

Fortunately, American Catholic Feminist Movement still managed to spread some positivities as Bovee concluded that "even though the Catholic feminist movement failed to achieve some of its most high profile goals such as women's ordination, it succeeded in the long run in the development of feminist academic theology and in obtaining female altar servers and many non-ordained pastoral and ministerial positions as the priest vocation crisis afflicted the church." [25]

3.4. The Churches Argued Against the Legislation of Abortions during the 1970s

The Churches and Conservative Christians did not support women's rights to choose during the second-wave feminism by strongly arguing against the legislation of abortions. Even though it was not a surprise that the Churches would not support abortions, it still supported the thesis that the Churches mainly opposed the second-wave feminism during the 1970s. Feminists in the 1970s argued that they should expand their freedom by being able to control their own bodies, but the Churches opposed the spread of women's freedom of choices. The Catholic Church not only opposed the abortion reform but also was willing to use political ways to ensure that the law continued to reflect Church teachings. Another reason why the Catholic Church opposed abortions was that they "emphasized that sex was for the sacred purpose of creating life, and did not support women's interests in engaging in sexual relations and retaining control of decisions whether and when to parent" [26] Since the Churches just saw the purpose of sex for reproduction, the Churches emphasize that women have the freedom to control their own bodies. As a result, Rosemary Radford Reuther published "The Church Against Itself" in 1967 to criticize the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the Church's views of sexuality and reproduction. [27] The Catholic Churches refused to support women's rights to choose because of their unchangeable opinions again, but they made a different argument in public. In the public area, "Catholic mobilized to oppose any exception to criminal bans on abortion—for maternal health or rape—on the ground that abortion is the taking of a human life" [9]. The Churches and its believers also managed to connect abortions with the attacks on the Equal Rights Amendment. As Phyllis Schlafly's first attack on the ERA on February of 1972 stated, "Women's libbers are promoting free sex instead of the 'slavery' of marriage. They are promoting Federal 'day-care centers' for babies instead of homes. They are promoting abortions instead of families" [28] Her opinions were very similar to those of the Churches' since they both argued that abortions were pro-family, and Christianity valued the stability of families. Similarly, the opposes to abortions from Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod continue to today since they believe that abortion "is not a moral option, except as a tragically unavoidable

byproduct of medical procedures necessary to prevent the death of another human being, viz., the mother.” [29] They also believe that abortions are not only violate God’s words but also a sin no matter it is legal or not.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the Churches and the second-wave feminism had a contradictory relationship since the Churches opposed most of the feminist movements in the 1970s. The Churches opposed the ERA, women’s freedom of employment, and women’s body control. The feminist movement is obviously still going on today, and Christianity is still the most popular religion in the United States. It’s significant to understand their past history since both of them are still a large part of our society. For instance, people need to know the past history between the Churches and feminism to understand Churches’ opinions on the “ME TOO” movement. However, not many works were written about them. This paper covers Churches’ opinions on different feminist movements in the 1970s to help people understand their full relationship, so either side won’t easily sway people’s opinions.

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