

# Church and Family V: Feminism, Church and Family in the 1980s

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In the late 1960s, American women and women throughout the world began to awaken to the fact that the victories of women's rights to work, to vote and to be educated had not solved the problem of women's inequality. A silent problem was gnawing away at women of the middle classes in industrialized nations, a problem "without a name" as Betty Friedan put it in her pioneering book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1962. In the 1950s all the media of culture and socialization had been directed toward convincing women that their place was in the home, that full-time child-raising and domesticity was their highest vocation. The women who had accepted the "feminine mystique" felt increasingly entrapped and stifled.

At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement and the Peace Movement were raising American consciousness about the structures of social oppression. Many young women responded enthusiastically to the call to win equality for Black Americans and to end the war in southeast Asia, only to find themselves treated as second-class citizens by their male colleagues, expected to be sexually available, to do the rote labor of the movement, but not to make the real decision. Out of these various forms of discontent, an explosion was gradually building, the explosion of a new movement for women's liberation.

Betty Friedan had called women to seize their discontent by leaving their exclusive homemaking roles, returning to school for further education and seeking interesting jobs. Entrance into the public world of work was to be the panacea. But many women already suspected that this was not enough; that the world of work was also a place where women were marginalized and exploited. Gradually an analysis of the structures that subordinated women began to grow in the feminist movement. Women began to look at all different levels and aspects of the issue of sexism: psychological, cultural, economic, legal and, for some, religious. The name of this general system of subordination of women was given a name. It was called patriarchy.

Economically, patriarchy used women as unpaid or low paid

labor. It shaped the psychologies of men and women to specialize in different kinds of psychic development to fit into the separate work roles assigned to them by society. Sexism socialized men to be afraid of their sensibilities and women to be afraid of their power. It made men stifle their tears and their fear and made women stifle their anger and their intellectual imagination. Sexism shaped a legal system to make women the dependents of men; an educational system to ratify separate socialization for men and women, despite appearances of equality. And finally, it shaped thinking in the social sciences and religion that made these separate spheres and roles appear to be natural and divinely ordained. Women began to develop a history of patriarchy, to show its development and changes in different cultures and economic systems.

Women also began to recover their own history as women. They began to rediscover their feminist forebears of the 19th century who had fought for far more than the vote and whose own analysis of far-reaching aspects of patriarchy anticipated most of what 20th-century women were rediscovering. This story of 19th-century feminism had never been taught to them in school nor recorded in the text-books of American history, even though it was well-documented and had happened only in the generation of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Why? Even when women made history, their history was not told. The story was dropped out of the official texts, except for a few joking references to the "Bloomer girls" and a perfunctory note that women won the vote in 1921. Women began to suspect that the silence about women in male culture had far less to do with women's actual historical inactivity throughout the centuries than with the inability of women to control those media of culture that tell and teach history.

As women studied patriarchy and traced its various manifestations in religion, education, law, social and economic structures, psychology and sexuality, some got increasingly angry. Male humanity began to take on the face of demonic conspirators against female humanity. Such women began to doubt whether they should love men, or whether they even liked them, and especially whether they should live with them. The institution of marriage and the family seemed to be the primary means devised by patriarchy to entrap women in all these myriad forms of subordination: sexual, psychological, social, cultural and economic. The root of it was female childbearing.

Some women began to imagine alternatives to the traditional role

of woman as childbearer and childraiser in subordination to men in marriage. Shulamite Firestone wrote a book in 1968 in which she declared that women's reproductive role was the key to women's exploitation. Women would never be equal to men as long as they bore children. She suggested a technological revolution in which egg and sperm banks would conceive children in test tubes and gestate them in artificial wombs. Other radical feminists were less willing to let go of women's function as childbearer, suspecting that this was as much a basis of women's power as women's suppression and indeed the two were closely linked together. They wished not to end women's function as mother, but rather the social appropriation of that function into structures of subordination to the men who fathered. They began to experiment with ways that women might band together to raise children in separate female communities.

By the mid-70s, the feminist movement began to become deeply divided between separatist feminists and the vast majority of feminists following more moderate paths. For many feminists, however, separatism was more a stage in their psychological evolution than a permanent stance. Dreams of separating from men were a cathartic way of working out their deep feeling of anger and hurt. Gradually most began to realise that one cannot project all one's feelings of anger on men without beginning to dehumanize oneself as well. Although men (or at least some men) had had more opportunity to do violent and cruel things than most women, women were not incapable of doing a few mean tricks themselves. Moreover, men, although shaped to be agents of patriarchy and its greater beneficiaries, were also its tools and victims. Most feminists, indeed, had never really lost this basic common sense. But even most of the radicals, except for a few, began to get past the "anti-man" phase of feminism and to recognise the fact that, however difficult, men and women were going to have to work it out together on the same planet, and, for the most part, in the same household as well.

The feminism of the 1970s was also groping toward some recovery of a critical female culture through which to confront patriarchal values, but its efforts to do so were confused and contradictory. On the one hand, there still remained considerable remnants of that Victorian female culture which socialized women to be the nurturers and altruists of society. Like their Victorian ancestresses, contemporary women endeavoured to claim this set of female values as a critical culture over against the male-dominant culture which emphasized competitive rationality. Women began

again to say that they did not want to be like men, but stood for superior biophilic values. The task of feminism was not to imitate male values, but to transform the male system through superior female values.

However, many feminists were ambivalent about laying claim to these notions of women's superior moral culture, because it was apparent that precisely these notions of woman as altruistic and nurturing were part of a Victorian culture of complementarity which set women apart in a domestic sphere and socialized women to be non-competitive in the male world. For some women this meant that women should not try to claim a separate culture from men, but rather should prove that they were just as capable of rationality and efficiency. Women needed to cultivate precisely those traits which had been denied them in the culture of complementarity and to challenge men at their own game.

Still a third group wished to claim a separate female culture in confrontation with the male world. But this female culture should not be comprised of softness and docility. On the contrary, women should claim precisely those images of female potency most feared by male culture. They should boldly proclaim themselves as Amazons and witches. Women should neither imitate men nor seek to compliment men, but they should rise up against them in all the fearful glory of those myths of female potency which male culture had traditionally ruled out of bounds. Like their Victorian ancestresses, feminists in the 1970s also began to explore the prehistory of the human race in search of a female culture before the rise of patriarchy. In so doing, they often, uncritically, took over Victorian scholarship about pre-patriarchal-matriarchal societies and exhibited a similar difficulty in distinguishing Victorian notions of female culture from presumed ancient cultures of the Stone Age. However inadequate these discussions of matriarchal culture may be from the point of view of historical scholarship, they must be seen as part of a renewed search for a critical female culture by which the feminist can critique reigning male values which she regards as oppressive.

If feminism displayed difficulties in finding an integral female culture through which women could define their identity, this reflects the cultural marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture where masculinity is defined as normative humanness. Women thus are left with a series of contradictory fragments defined over against and in relation to this dominant definition of male humanness. Women are asked to choose between fragments: the loving mother who is weak

and unintelligent; the cool efficient worker who represses her feelings, and the monstrous witch and Amazon who is hatefully powerful. What is lacking is precisely an integral cultural image of female humanness which can be, at once, loving, intelligent and powerful.

As feminists in the 1970s struggled with these efforts to define their dilemma and find an alternative culture, the backlash against feminism was building up in conservative sectors of American society. Feminism is by no means the only target of the conservative backlash. This conservative movement began to build up as early as the late sixties in response to the development of a critical counter-culture that started to question many American social policies, both domestically in the areas of civil rights for racial minorities, poverty, the quality of the environment and the use of natural resources, and in foreign policy in relation to both the arms race and intervention in Third World liberation struggles. The New Right is a coalition of businessmen, politicians and cultural and religious leaders who seek to undercut the social base and repress the cultural expressions of these critical movements.

However, the attack on feminism, and also on gay rights, became the emotional center of its propaganda. By claiming to protect the "family" against the attacks of feminists, homosexuals and godless communists, the New Right could conceal from many Americans, including many who enthusiastically voted for Ronald Reagan, that the major targets of its policies would be the poor people, especially women and children, the elderly and the American industrial worker. The underlying roots of the conservative swing, not only in the United States, but in other industrialized countries, was the growing global economic crisis which directed the industrial managers to retrench in order to preserve privileges of the wealthy against the rising expectations of outsiders: women, racial minorities and workers.

Various kinds of anti-abortion legislation have been a central arm of the conservative movement, aimed ultimately at repealing the Supreme Court decision of 1972 that made abortion legal in the first and second trimesters. The emotional hype of this campaign effectively conceals for many Americans that what is really at issue is women's reproductive self-determination. Thus efforts in the U.S. to deny abortion are typically accompanied by other legislation and policies that are anti-contraceptive and would limit the availability of sex education. Most of these policies have the actual effect of increasing the numbers of unwanted pregnancies and thus the recourse to abortion or else the escalation of illegitimate births of unwed

mothers, particularly among the teenage poor.

The mentality of the conservative movement in the U.S. was possibly revealed most strikingly in the “Pro-family bill” introduced into the Senate by Paul Laxalt, Reagan’s campaign manager in 1980. It contained titles on education, welfare, religious institutions, taxation and domestic relations. Under education it proposed the denying of federal funds to any school or school district that did not make provision of prayer in the public schools. Other proposals in this section aimed to inhibit union organizing by teachers, sports activities which mixed the sexes and textbooks that promoted the equality of women. In the section on welfare, it aimed to legislate tax deductions for those supporting elderly relatives but denial of food stamps to college students and tax inhibitions on day care centers.

Through taxation legislation the bill sought to encourage the nuclear family with working husband and non-working wife. Under domestic relations, it discouraged the promotion of shelters for battered wives or abused children. It defended corporal punishment for children as a parental right. Although it did not explicitly say that husbands have a right to beat their wives, it implied that aid to battered wives was deleterious to the “family”. Runaway shelters were to be forbidden to give contraceptive or abortion counselling.

In a sweeping provision, the bill proposed to deny Federal legal assistance to any program that advocated social activism—labor organizing, boycotts, picketing strikes or demonstrations, or training programs that supported such activities. Legal assistance funds were to be denied to programs that counselled on abortions, desertion of the armed forces, desegregation of schools, divorce or the rights of homosexuals. The final section of the bill stated that Federal discrimination statutes should not be construed to protect homosexuals from discrimination in employment.

The bill gave Americans a picture of what its author meant by “family protection”. It would repress all the forms of social service that had emerged in the preceding two decades to assist women and children in crisis. It was assumed that if only women and children were again reduced to their traditional dependency in the patriarchal family, beaten occasionally, made to pray regularly and shielded from critical ideas and movements, all would be well and America would be “strong again”. The authors of the bill saw an explicit connection between the restoration of the patriarchal family, the repression of social dissent and the strengthening of military defense. It was not accidental that the Reagan budget simultaneously revealed precisely a

policy of escalation of the military budget at the expense of programs of social welfare, especially those for poor women and children.

In proposing this package of legislation, the New Right exploited the dominant mythology that feminists and homosexuals were a “threat” to the family. The crisis of the family was thus seen as having been “caused” by these dissenting groups and its restoration would follow from their repression. This has caused feminists to realize their own mistakes in playing into the anti-family rhetoric. Although most feminists, as well as homosexuals, are very much committed to and involved in their own families, this had remained a private matter. Feminists had failed to present positive alternatives to replace those aspects of modern family life which they have criticized. Betty Friedan’s recent book on the feminist reevaluation of the family, called *The Second Stage*, represents this new effort to redress the balance. But this often sounds like a mere retrenchment of aging feminists who have now become grandmothers, rather than a creative synthesis.

It is important to be clear that what is called the “crisis of the family” is not “caused” by feminism. The crisis of the family is caused by the combined forces of patriarchy and industrialism. Patriarchy has given us a culture and family structure that reduces women to dependency. Industrialism has caused a loss of the traditional productive functions of women in the family, has fragmented the extended family into a rootless nuclear family, has made woman both worker and full-time mother, and then increasingly abandoned her to be both at the same time. The New Right policies do nothing to alleviate this distress because they merely strike at the symptoms. They do so primarily by cutting those programs designed to alleviate the distress through government assistance. Since they do not understand or seek to correct the underlying causes, their policies in fact have the effect of actually aggravating all the symptoms that they seek to repress the unwed teenage mother, the two-job family seeking to make ends meet in rising inflation and joblessness, the impoverished female-headed household and the lonely elderly, usually female, without family or adequate means of support.

If one is to propose a serious alternative to this crisis, then one must be willing to look at root causes rather than simply strike at symptoms. Undoubtedly, the single most important source of crisis in the American family at the present time is economic stress created by rising unemployment plus inflation. A family with an unemployed father or a father working part-time, and a mother also working at a

marginal low-paid job, or with a woman trying to provide the total support for the family on a low salary, is a family under stress by definition. Cutting this family's food stamps or children's lunch program does not exactly help to alleviate the stress.

The cause of this economic stress is an economic system that is primarily concerned about company profits, rather than harnessing the system of economic production to the common good of the whole society by full employment and by the assurance of adequate income and jobs for all families. Allied with this exploitative profit economy is a schizophrenic culture that divides home and work into separate spheres, segregates women as primary parents in a privatized domestic culture and alienates the male as worker from co-parenting. Since access to education, work and enlarged human development is available only in the public sphere outside the home, this system makes it impossible for women to overcome their economic dependency or their cultural underdevelopment except by going outside the home and thus falling in some way into contradiction with the role assigned to them in the family.

It is difficult to imagine any adequate alternative to this system of role division that has been shaped by patriarchy and industrialism. One radical effort to create an alternative is represented by communal societies, which began to be developed already in the 1830s in America in response to the early experience of industrialization. In these communal societies, represented by groups such as Rappites, Hutterites and Owenites in America and the kibbutz movement in Israel, the family and the economy are reintegrated in a total community which owns its own means of production and which works, lives and raises its children communally. Such experiments are usually more successful if they have a strong religious or ideological base to give the members a sense of common commitment. When this sense of commitment and common dedication is present, such communities have generally been economically quite successful and have also provided their members with a satisfying sense of bringing work, family and society back into an integral relation. But such experiments do not appear to be feasible as a general solution. They remain the special preserve of small groups with high levels of motivation. Most of us in the contemporary world must look to a plurality of incremental changes which are designed to help alleviate the contradictions between work and home, male and female roles, family and society.

What is needed is a redefinition of the relationship between home



and work which would allow women to participate in the educational, cultural, political and job opportunities of the public world, while integrating males into co-responsibility for parenting and homemaking. There are several kinds of changes that would help to facilitate this realignment of home-work relationships. One would be the division of work into shorter and more flexible work units, allowing two bread-winners each to choose thirty or thirty-five hour work weeks on various time scales. Such shorter work weeks would not be defined as "part-time", but would be paid proportionally to full job pay and benefits.

Another important change would be a commitment to child-care services for all working parents that would be developed either in neighbourhoods where people live, such as apartment buildings, or in work places. Child-care units on the work site would allow small children to travel with their parents back and forth to work, to be joined by them for lunch or visited during the day, obviating at least to some extent the frantic efforts of the working parent to deposit the child someplace in order to get to work. The working community itself, or the neighbourhood community, would begin to function as something of an extended family with peer relations between children and mutual support of parents.

A third important element in such realignment of home and work, family and society, is the decentralization of communities to bring living, working and cultural spaces back into more organic relationship to each other. This movement back to more integrated communities should not create simply more insular small towns, but should also be related to a broader sense of networking and interdependence of communities within a large urban, suburban and rural complex. The city of Toronto exhibits at least some efforts along these lines, both strengthening ethnic neighbourhood and local communities, while giving a large complex the economic and political base of interdependence. With computer technology, as well as the crisis of energy, the need for large productive complexes placed far away from living spaces, creating bedroom communities separated from work places by an hour's commuting time, become less and less necessary or economical in advanced industrial society.

Such realignment of home and work, male and female roles, must be accompanied by cultural shifts which would, on the one hand, really support the rights of women to participate equally in the public sphere as workers and cultural agents, and also support the role of men as fathers in the family. In spite of lip services given to the

importance of parenting, in fact, modern society wishes to commit very little of its resources to supporting parenting, by women or, even less, by men. One example of this is programs developed to give help to teenage parents, all of which have been aimed at the female, ignoring the male, both as sexual partner and, usually, sexual aggressor in the relationship, as well as the father of resultant children. Males receive little support when they seek to give priority to their parenting roles. The father who takes paternity leave or who rejects a job move in order to maintain family ties to a particular community may even suffer reprisals from the job. We need a new culture of men and women, both as co-parents and partners in marriage and as co-workers in society, rather than a dichotomized culture that places them on opposite sides of the home-work division.

A new culture which supports family life must also rethink the nuclear family of husband, wife and children as the sole expression of the household. It becomes increasingly evident that this unit, however important to most people at some part of their life, is inadequate as the sole unit by which to define households and families. It has been estimated that only about 12% of Americans live in this kind of household of working husband, non-working wife and dependent children at any one time, and most women spend only 25% of their lives in such a unit. Yet both the churches and the dominant culture give little support to the large numbers of people who do not live in such units. The result is that many people live lives of poverty and fragmented loneliness because there is little support for alternative kinds of relationship.

In the last two centuries, life expectancy in the U.S. has increased almost 100% for women. This increased life expectancy for women, and also for men, means we must think in terms of a plurality of types of household relationships at different stages of the life cycle. One needs different kinds of bonds at different periods. The parental-child relationship of childhood might change to a household of single young adults who live together in their twenties, to new networks of young parents and their children, then changing to networks of older people, often without spouses, that might bond together in their older years. Complex cultural, as well as legal, restrictions often make it very difficult for two women with children to live together to share income and childraising, or several elderly people on pensions, perhaps with younger relatives, to pool resources in a single household. And yet precisely such arrangements can be a real solution to the problems of poverty, loneliness and harassment of these persons without conventional families, trying to survive separately.

The Church is particularly important here. Just as it has tended to sacralize only one kind of family and thus illegitimize any other, it also would have the cultural resources to develop the support for more

plural types of family systems. The Church remains the main depository in our culture for the values of community life; for the ethic of mutuality and mutual service. In its Scriptures, the Church enshrines the early Christian vision of the Church as a new kind of community, a new kind of humanity, overcoming the old division of patriarchal society of male over female, master over slave, racial group against racial group. But this vision of the Church as a new community, a new family, has either been interpreted as a celibate community over against the family, or else distorted into sacralizing the traditional patriarchal family. The challenge to create a new understanding of family as committed communities of mutual service, taking a variety of forms, can also offer the Church a new opportunity to reinterpret this ancient Christian vision of the redeemed society as a new community of equals.

## Religious Belief and the Shadow of Uncertainty

Mark Corner

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In his *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, John Wesley spoke of faith as follows:

...as you cannot reason concerning colours if you have no natural sight—because all the ideas received by your senses are of a different kind... so you cannot reason concerning spiritual things if you have no spiritual sight, because all your ideas received by your outward senses are of a different kind; yea, far more different from those received by faith or internal sensation than the idea of colour from that of sound.<sup>1</sup>

In Wesley's mind faith is a 'spiritual sense' which enables the believer to perceive a reality beyond the scope of the non-believer restricted to the 'natural' senses. Faith, Wesley emphasises, is not a

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