

2007

Ambiguous Women: Debates Within American Evangelical Feminism

Syska, A

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/15392>

10.1386/ejac.26.3.167_1

The European Journal of American Culture

Intellect Ltd.

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

European Journal of American Culture Volume 26 Number 3. © Intellect Ltd 2007.
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/ejac.26.3.167/1

Ambiguous women: Debates within American evangelical feminism

Alicja Sowinska *Saint Louis University, USA*

Abstract

This article is an analysis of major debates within American evangelical feminism since its emergence in early 1970s. It examines ways in which American evangelical feminists negotiate their identity in the daily struggle between the mundane and the sacred, home setting and church practice, and their private and public lives. Through presentation of personal stories and lived experiences it argues that evangelical feminists' ambiguity is a significant and powerful force that not only forges distinctive self-awareness among evangelical feminists, but also shapes diverse understandings of evangelical feminism and shifts the boundaries of both evangelicalism and feminism in America.

Keywords

evangelical
feminism
American
evangelical feminism
women's studies
identity construction

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1855)

'Evangelical feminism' is a term that, if classified, would probably belong to the category 'confusing', 'contradictory', or even 'oxymoronic', as it links together two ideas commonly considered at odds with each other. However, at least a few thousand women in America consider themselves evangelical feminists.¹ Should they be dismissed as possessing a 'divided self' or a 'false consciousness?' Perhaps a better question is 'what is their own attitude to evangelicalism and to feminism? How do they place themselves within these dissenting positions?' This article argues that American evangelical feminists are suspended between two disparate worlds and inhabit an ambiguous role. They are torn by two competing but equally strong ideas and struggle to reconcile two opposing identities. Because they are too devoted to each of the camps to compromise one for another yet do not want to be identified solely with either, they conceptualise ways to reconcile these two ideologies. In this creative process of negotiation, evangelical feminists in the United States forge an entirely new category of feminism and a new paradigm for evangelicalism.

Some terms used in this article require exacting explanations and therefore will be introduced and defined in the first part of the essay. I then delineate the history of the formation and the development of evangelical

1 I calculate this number on the basis of the membership declared by two leading evangelical feminist organisations: the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus and Christians for Biblical Equality. However, one would suspect there are more 'undeclared' evangelical feminists.

- 2 Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2003, 3. Ingersoll writes about conservative women who challenge gender norms in their religious traditions. Since they use war-related vocabulary when describing their daily battles, she calls their stories 'war stories'.
- 3 Lori G. Beaman, *Shared Beliefs Different Lives: Women's Identities in Evangelical Context*, St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999, 64. Similar research was conducted by Clyde Wilcox and supports quite strong feminist leanings among evangelical women. See Clyde Wilcox, 'Feminism and Anti-Feminism among Evangelical Women', *The Western Political Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1989).
- 4 The comfort zones are one's living, work, and social environment that one has grown accustomed to. They determine one's preferences, the life style one chooses, and people one associates with. Leaving one's comfort zone means stepping outside of what feels safe and familiar and denaturalizing it.
- 5 By taking action I mean publishing, teaching, and generally speaking out on the public forum.

feminism and assess the importance and influence of the movement. Finally, to show how evangelical feminism is lived and negotiated daily in America, I will present examples of the struggles of individual women who identify themselves as evangelical feminists – what Julie Ingersoll calls personal war stories 'of the women caught in the middle of the conservative Christian culture war over gender'.²

Those who do not share their evangelical worldview typically portray evangelical women as monolithically conservative and anti-feminist. However, all communities face issues that evoke controversy and stir up discord; feminism is one of those issues. Among American evangelicals of both genders, the topic arouses emotions comparable only to those stimulated by the divine healing phenomenon. It also divides. Lori G. Beaman found and classified at least three categories of evangelical women according to their views on the issue of feminism: traditionalists on one end of the spectrum and evangelical feminists on the other each represented about ten per cent of interviewed women; the remaining eighty percent identified as moderates. Beaman found that evangelical women usually differ over the issue of feminine submission, male leadership, participation in paid labour force and mothering. Traditionalists interpret biblical references to women and their roles more conservatively whereas feminists reject any church rhetoric that endorses inequality and consider the biblical submission of women the biggest misunderstanding of the scripture. Moderates, who represent the majority of evangelical women, seek the middle ground by opting for mutual submission and partnership in marriage. They reinterpret the biblical submission 'so as to preserve and enhance their own agency'.³ Beaman's research shows how evangelical women in many different ways negotiate and reconcile their religious beliefs with secular pressures in everyday life.

Just like American evangelical Christians evangelical women are therefore not unified on the issue of feminism, as a whole. Acknowledging the multitude of attitudes among these women, I focus in this article on the small group of evangelical feminists (about 10% of all evangelical women) who voice their issues in public and negotiate a space for themselves in the gender discourse. They differ from the moderates Beaman identifies in her research in that moderates usually negotiate in the home setting and do not attempt significant change in the public discourse. Evangelical feminists, however, push their agenda outside of their comfort zones by initiating the dialogue and challenging traditional discourse.⁴ This public activism differentiates evangelical feminists from other evangelical women who sympathise with them or even take feminist positions on social issues. Evangelical feminists take action.⁵

Thus, evangelical feminists are women who participate in the process of change by challenging gender norms and advocating for gender equality in their religious traditions. Evangelical feminists also call themselves biblical or Christian feminists; I use these terms interchangeably. Evangelical feminists try to find the middle ground between the evangelical

and the feminist positions, so they cannot be classified by any of these two poles: they do not entirely share fundamentalists' views but also do not endorse secular feminism. As stated before, they are suspended between two disparate ideologies – feminism and evangelicalism; these also require clear definitions.

Evangelicalism is a term many scholars have struggled to define.⁶ Contrary to popular belief, American evangelical subculture is not unified on political, social or ideological issues, but functions as a coalition that incorporates multiple groups with disparate special interests under its conservative Christian religious and cultural umbrella.⁷ In the context of this article, two definitions by Pamela Cochran and Julie Ingersoll will be the most useful.⁸ Cochran defines evangelicalism as a 'pietistic, revivalist movement embedded in the American milieu of democracy, individualism, and capitalism' with 'a common set of beliefs, such as the authority of scripture, the efficacy of Christ's atonement on the cross, and the importance of evangelism and a transformed life'.⁹ Ingersoll sees evangelicalism as 'a cultural system, a set of symbols that act as a rubric for ordering life and providing meaning'.¹⁰ According to these definitions, evangelicalism should be understood as both a religious and a cultural movement, which provides its members clear answers to life's questions. This context also conveys the underlying threat that biblical feminists represent to the evangelical subculture; chaos and disorder endanger the movement.

Evangelical feminists have been a part of the larger feminist movement and are often (but not necessarily) placed within its boundaries. The feminist movement, according to the Webster's Dictionary, was organised around 'the principle that woman should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men' with a goal of seeking to even out the inequalities and eliminate discrimination that women face because of their sex.¹¹ However simple the definition, it constituted a tremendous challenge to the Christian community. While most evangelical women's attitudes towards feminism were selectively positive, accepting of pay equity, career opportunities and equality,¹² negative concerns usually involved the common feminist image, what evangelical women saw as feminists' self-centeredness, denigration of men, approval of abortion, extremism, and 'un-ladylike' behaviour.¹³ Based on these perceptions, some evangelical women rejected feminist rhetoric as contradictory to the Christian role of women as 'peacemakers' and reconcilers. Feminism, if appropriated, should find its place always after faith.

Being a significant part of American culture, the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s could not remain without influence on evangelical culture. The new evangelical feminists found parallels in maternal feminism (women are special because as mothers they are chosen to preserve the society), standpoint feminism (no position is neutral and women are uniquely situated), and relational feminism (stressing the ethics of care and positing them as superior to ethics of justice). While a variety of feminist groups were being formed on the secular front, religious feminists

6 See Christian Smith, *Christian America?: What Evangelicals Really Want*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

7 Evangelical feminism can be considered one of those special interest groups.

8 Pamela D.H. Cochran is an evangelical feminist writer and author of *Evangelical Feminism: A History*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2005. Julie Ingersoll is a former evangelical feminist, who stirred away from the movement disillusioned by the impossibility of reconciliation between her faith and feminism.

9 Cochran, 6–7.

10 Ingersoll, 16.

11 Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th ed.

12 Beaman, 102–103.

13 *Ibid.*, 104–105.

- 14 I adopt this classification of religious feminists after Ron Rhodes. See Ron Rhodes, *The Debate over Feminist Theology: Which View Is Biblical?* (cited 11/5/2005). Available from <http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/Feminism.html>
- 15 Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*, 1st ed., San Francisco, California: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, 10.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 17 Women challenging gender norms in the religious setting were active in the previous centuries, of course. However, they largely maintained their positions as outsiders and did not have significant over American culture. See Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- 18 Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, 3rd. ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.
- 19 Both 1986 and 1992 editions of the book had a different subtitle: *Biblical Feminism For Today*.
- 20 For the full text of the statement of gender equality see Cochran, 12-13.

slowly developed into at least three, often overlapping, clusters: New Age feminists, who are religious but worship a feminine deity or goddess; liberal Christian feminists, who believe in the cultural contextuality of the bible; and evangelical feminists, who believe in the authority of scripture but hold to the idea that the bible, if interpreted correctly, supports equality between men and women.¹⁴ These three kinds of biblical feminism in different ways resolve the perceived discord between faith and feminism.

It is important to observe that incorporating feminism into a Christian life is not a simple and commonplace decision, because the word 'feminism' carries with it an image of an enormous negative energy in the culture, and especially in the church. According to Sue Monk Kidd, an American evangelical feminist, a woman branded as feminist is considered hostile to Christianity and her opinions are usually belittled and discredited. Kidd writes in her memoir, '*Feminist*. What a word to deal with. I felt a secret sympathy for the underlying cause of feminism—what it might do for women—but I was uncomfortable with the images it carried'.¹⁵ She reports that evangelical women would rather stay silent than be associated with feminism explaining that it had been the policy of the church itself to maintain a negative image of feminism 'as a way of controlling women and discouraging them from challenging the status quo'.¹⁶ Thus portraying feminism as harmful to the church has worked to subvert women's potential sympathy with the movement. Nonetheless, the feminist inroads into the evangelical subculture were inevitable and in time women found their voices and started creating their own evangelical feminist narratives.

Evangelical feminism emerged with its full force in the early 1970s America among upper-middle-class evangelical women frustrated with what they considered to be discrimination in church on the basis of their sex.¹⁷ An important step in initiating the new evangelical feminist movement was the 1974 publication of *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* by Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty.¹⁸ This book showed evangelical women for the first time that evangelicalism and feminism could be reconciled. As the authors reported in the book's second edition, this novel idea had a widespread impact on the readers.¹⁹ Women wrote letters testifying to their feelings of loneliness and lack of understanding on the part of the church in their questioning traditional views about gender roles.

As Scanzoni and Hardesty were writing their book, the 1973 Evangelicals for Social Action conference in Chicago proved to be a turning point. At this meeting, known as the Thanksgiving workshop, Nancy Hardesty made a statement of gender equality, some women participants expressed their isolation as feminists within the evangelical subculture, and others encouraged hermeneutical methods of studying the bible.²⁰ Emboldened by the success of this small workshop, the few attendees planned another conference to be held the following year. This time more women arrived and brought with them concrete ideas as to how

both women and men could support evangelical feminist issues. These conferences functioned as consciousness-raising workshops that helped women in sharing experiences, coordinating information, and building support networks.

As a result of these meetings, the first evangelical feminist organisation, Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC), was born. Women active in EWC did not reject the bible but reinterpreted it to show its liberating – not limiting and oppressive – power. They did not consider the apostles sexist but misunderstood by the patriarchal church. They chose to reject all of the church's trusted secondary sources and to declare their fidelity to the primary source of the bible, but the bible re-interpreted. As they wrote in their 1974 manifesto, 'We are Christians; we are also feminists. Some say we cannot be both, but Christianity and feminism for us are inseparable. . . . We are committed to scripture and we seek to find in it meaning for our lives'.²¹ Thus, the biblical feminists saw that gender equality they sought was inscribed in the very words of the bible. They just needed to find it.

This essay does not investigate scriptural intricacies biblical feminists examined in their rich publications. However, for the sake of clarity and information, the main principles dictated by this early movement need to be summarised. The theological underpinning of their view is Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. The cornerstone of the evangelical feminist position professes that men and women were created equally in God's image and that female subordination resulted from the curse released by the death of Christ. Second, biblical feminists say that Jesus was also a feminist and that his extraordinary treatment of women testifies to their elevation. Third, Christian feminists claim that if interpreted properly in its historical context, the New Testament intends to abolish gender distinctions. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, who believed that the scripture reflected apostles' personal convictions and their cultural beliefs and thus should be interpreted as culturally biased, especially championed this hermeneutical approach. Hers was the most liberal position that met with opposition within the large cluster of evangelical feminists; and a more ideologically conservative group soon formed in response.

Liberal evangelical feminists to some degree followed their secular sisters in their social agenda – they demanded men to participate more in parenting and women to become more active in public life of the church. They expected more partnership in marriage, equal financial opportunities in the job market, 'control over their lives and labour', right to abortion, and an inclusive language of religion.²² The more conservative biblical feminists, however, worried that this would lead to compromising the bible and relinquishing its authority. Scanzoni and Mollenkott's 1978 publication of *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* added fuel to the fire. The book embraced homosexuality by finding support for it in reinterpreting

21 Cochran, 33.

22 Ibid., 75.

23 http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/who_we_are.shtml.

24 Ibid.

25 CBE also emphasises that approximately 68 percent of their members have attended graduate school and 20 per cent have received PhDs. See <http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/faq.shtml>.

26 At the time, the organisation also experienced a tremendous financial and identity crisis, since more conservative evangelical feminists drifted away to join the CBE. The crisis was solved by tightening its fiscal management (cutting conference expenses) and scaling back its activities (holding biennial, instead of annual, conferences and publishing *Update*). The identity crisis was solved by a more uniformed acceptance of pluralism and diversity. See Cochran, 173–177.

27 <http://www.eewc.com/About.htm>. EEWC does not provide data on their membership.

28 Cochran, 111.

29 Ibid., 148.

the bible. Because conservative feminists were not ready to grant homosexuality full acceptance, the split was inevitable.

In 1988, a new organisation emerged – Christians for Biblical Equality. The CBE statement read, 'EWC was moving in a direction these [more conservative] members perceived as unbiblical'.²³ CBE decided to focus on equal opportunities for women, but does not define itself as a women's organisation. On their website, they write:

Christians for Biblical Equality is a non-profit organization comprised of individual and church members from over 80 denominations who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnicities and all economic classes, based on the teachings of scripture as reflected in Galatians 3:28: There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²⁴

CBE claims to have about 2,000 members.²⁵ They are strong supporters of heterosexual marriage and celibate singleness, oppose homosexuality and abortion, and accept inclusive language only as far as people, not God, are concerned. Their camp is biblically centrist, less feminist than EWC, and strongly evangelical.

For their part, the women of EWC signalled their inclusive nature by changing their name to EEWC, Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus (1990).²⁶ They describe themselves as Christian feminists and state on their website:

We call ourselves Evangelical (from the Greek word *euangelion*, "good news") because we believe that the Gospel is good news for all people. We call ourselves Ecumenical because we recognize that the Christian faith is expressed through a rich diversity of traditions. We are committed to the full inclusion of women with men in the home, the Church, and the world. We call ourselves Caucus to reflect our origin as one of the various caucuses of Evangelicals for Social Action.²⁷

Despite their clear statement, some American evangelicals no longer consider the group evangelical because of its increasingly radical views on scriptural interpretation and social justice.²⁸ As the progressive EEWC feminists turned to other than biblical sources of authority, such as science and experience, they also became more pluralistic, including in their theology God the Mother, a universal salvation (not dependent on Jesus' atonement), a redefined sin, and more tolerance of divorce, homosexuality and abortion rights. As Kaye Cook concluded in her research, EEWC members 'are solidly in the feminist camp and less clearly evangelical'.²⁹

Despite their ideological differences, both CBE and EEWC became important organisations that provide support for American evangelical feminists in their daily struggles. As they gained more popularity and

influence, however, biblical feminists met with a backlash from their traditionalist opponents, on both individual and institutional levels.³⁰ The most symbolic backlash came from the 2000 Southern Baptist Convention, where a statement upholding wives' submission to their husbands was issued. But even earlier, in 1987, an anti-feminist organisation, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) was founded. It was born out of a conviction that 'the widespread ambivalence' about gender roles in American society caused 'tragic effects' for the church, the family, and the true notions of manhood and womanhood.³¹ As the CBMW's rationale reads, the organisation is concerned with

the increasing promotion given to feminist egalitarianism with accompanying distortions or neglect of the glad harmony portrayed in Scripture between the loving, humble leadership of redeemed husbands and the intelligent, willing support of that leadership by redeemed wives.³²

These 'distortions', according to CBMW leaders, are attributable to biblical feminists' 'hermeneutical oddities devised to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of Biblical texts'.³³ Additionally, the CBMW's leaders, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, prepared a response to the gender issue controversy in the form of a large volume entitled *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*.³⁴

Piper and Grudem claim that evangelical feminist teachings cause uncertainty among American evangelicals and that most evangelicals do not accept feminist arguments. The aim of the book as they define it is 'to help Christians recover a noble vision of manhood and womanhood as God created them to be' and to provide a solution in the vision of 'complementarity' – an approach that combines sexual equality and difference.³⁵ Complementarity suggests that sexes are equal in personhood but different in their roles – 'equal before God *as persons* but *distinct in their manhood and womanhood*';³⁶ that women should not be pastors; that men are natural leaders and women should naturally submit to them (especially in marriage); and that, most controversially, homosexual orientation is a result of the confusion of gender roles in the society. The essays in the collection refer to different aspects of the gender debate, rebuking the evangelical feminist assertions and their biblical interpretations.

This tome did not go unanswered from evangelical feminists. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis edited as large a volume entitled *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*.³⁷ In it, the authors argue for 'biblical liberation of both men and women' and defend the assertion that the bible teaches equality.³⁸ Their approach is called egalitarianism. Egalitarians 'believe in gender complementarity – but *complementarity without hierarchy*'.³⁹ They reject any restrictions based on gender alone. An essay by Mimi Haddad and Alvera Mickelsen, 'Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality', is particularly interesting because it offers ways of facilitating acceptance of changes and new ideas

30 This strong backlash on the part of traditionalists testifies to the fact that biblical feminists made their inroads into evangelical subculture and impacted not only the evangelical home but also institutions of higher learning and the larger community.

31 <http://www.cbmw.org/about/danvers.php>.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991.

35 Ibid., xiv.

36 Ibid., 407.

37 Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

38 Ibid., 14.

39 Ibid., 15.

- 40 As Betty DeBerg in *Ungodly Women* and Nancy Ammerman in *Baptist Battles* have argued, changing gender roles and increasing participation of women in religious functions have had an effect of crystallizing Christian fundamentalism.
- 41 The fierce nature of the conflict is reflected in multiple consequences evangelical feminists have faced for voicing their opinions, from being disciplined or banned from speaking to being excommunicated.
- 42 Ingersoll, 21. Fuller is the largest interdenominational evangelical seminary in the world.
- 43 Ordination has been one of the main goals of the evangelical feminist movement. Pamela Cochran writes it is supported by 94 percent of people who identify with CBE and 98 percent of those from EWC.
- 44 Cochran, 5.
- 45 Ibid.

in the church, such as eliminating complexities of the language, showing how breaking gender barriers improves life, connecting to the core Christian values, communicating the new ideas in multiple ways, and letting people 'try out' the new concepts.

These two approaches – complementarity and egalitarianism – betray one of the most prominent differences between feminist and traditionalist understandings of reality – the way these groups understand gender. For traditionalists, gender is fixed and biological, whereas feminists see it as a social construct. Accordingly, to traditionalists the bible is clear about gender roles – woman should submit to her husband, who is the head of the family and over wife – and undermining gender divisions threatens the order of the universe.⁴⁰ On the other hand, biblical feminists claim that, if read properly, the bible teaches gender equality. Their starting point is Galatians 3:28 (there's no male or female in Christ), through which they interpret other passages. Furthermore, they argue that the Greek word *kephale* should not be translated as 'head' but as 'source', and thus does not imply authority but calls for 'mutual submission'. They point to examples of women functioning as church leaders, such as Phoebe or Priscilla. Thus, using traditional methods (reading the bible), evangelical feminists challenge traditional theology.

The fierce conflict notwithstanding, it is important to assess its results.⁴¹ Evangelical feminists have had a substantial influence over American culture. For example, as Julie Ingersoll argues, 'An important indicator of the influence of this movement is the presence of biblical feminist ideas at Fuller Theological Seminary',⁴² which now endorses inclusive language and employs only teachers who support women's ordination. At other institutions evangelical feminism also produces growing battles. In some denominations women are ordained.⁴³ Additionally, evangelical feminism weakened authority not only within feminist evangelical subculture but also throughout American religion by shifting emphasis away from the doctrine of inerrancy of the bible (belief in infallibility of the scripture) to hermeneutics (method of textual interpretation). By promoting interpretive methods of reading the bible, evangelical feminists also helped increase individualism within evangelical culture and American culture at large, emphasising the importance of personal experience, spirituality or personal faith and social justice.⁴⁴ Cochran also claims that evangelical feminism 'has helped shape a new pluralization in America'.⁴⁵ Presently, many progressive biblical feminists combine in their evangelical feminism elements of different religions, such as Buddhist, Daoist, New Age, Jewish and Christian beliefs. Thus, being a part of a considerable force in American culture, they also change the face of American evangelicalism. Finally, evangelical feminism provided evangelical women with an alternative to secular feminism, a new feminism based on a moral order.

Strong voices nonetheless assert that biblical feminism, left unchecked, can be dangerous. Many traditionalists claim that biblical feminists put

themselves above the bible and thus compromise it. They see evangelicalism and feminism as impossible to reconcile. As Mary A. Kassian put it, 'Feminism and Christianity are like thick oil and water: their very natures dictate that they cannot be mixed'.⁴⁶ Moreover, Kassian calls it an 'unholy union'.⁴⁷ Similarly, A. Duane Liftin argues that the only way to reach a harmony between evangelicalism and feminism is if one of these forces acquiesces and adapts the views of the other (with an underlying suggestion that feminists are those who should give up their cause).⁴⁸ The opinion that Christianity and feminism are antithetical is echoed not only by many conservative writers but also by some progressive feminists (especially those who left their religion).

These two forces, two distinct theologies, represent the external and internal forces with which evangelical feminists in America struggle daily – in their jobs and churches and, most importantly, in their homes, marriages and close communities. As mentioned earlier, when in the 1970s evangelical feminists first made their voices heard, they made some gains in seminaries and influenced the education of many religious leaders. However, because they focused on the theological and ideological rhetoric, they failed to change the larger evangelical subculture, which remains dominated by traditional views. Persistently, both sides of the conflict accuse their opponents of distorting the bible and the real meaning of Christianity. The conflict is being reproduced on the popular level and, discouragingly, negotiations and compromises on the part of evangelical women are still required. The traditional gender-based evangelical culture reproduces itself in often unspoken 'behavioral requirements that serve to create and to perpetuate gender segregation and a gendered social hierarchy'.⁴⁹ Examples of these practices are small gender-segregated group meetings (teaching and bible studies), gendered associations (such as Promise Keepers), and gendered social events (endorsing female bonding by socially obligatory wedding and baby showers and male bonding by baseball games or fishing trips).

Many books and essays testify to the harsh treatment biblical feminists often experience and obstacles they face within their evangelical communities. Janet Stocks's research shows how evangelical feminists in the denomination she examined struggle to make their voices heard.⁵⁰ When they started publishing a newsletter that challenged the patriarchal interpretations of the bible, it provoked fierce discussions. The feminists were accused of possessing a desire 'to dominate over their husbands',⁵¹ which in turn was said to corrupt the family and the society. Stocks documents attempts to silence the women by abolishing their newsletter and calling into question their ability to participate in a serious discussion. And although these particular feminists were very actively challenging the patriarchal structure of the church by publishing their opinions and provoking the gender debate, Stocks asserts that they did not have control over what would happen subsequently. Their written ideas, since they were not allowed to voice them orally, remained on the margin and were

46 Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992, 217.

47 *Ibid.*, 253.

48 A. Duane Liftin, *Evangelical Feminism: Why Traditionalists Reject It* (2004 [cited 11/5/2005 2005]). See also Paul W. Felix, Sr., "The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 5: 2, 1994. Available from www.cbmw.org/resources/articles/hermeneutics.pdf. D. Massimiliano Lorenzini, *Taking Every Thought Captive: The Role of Women in the Church* (cited 11/5/2005); available from <http://www.frontlinemin.org/women.asp>.

49 *Ibid.*, 109.

50 Stocks does not reveal the kind of denomination she writes about.

51 Janet Stocks, 'Voices from the Margins: Evangelical Feminist Negotiation in the Public Debate of a Small Denomination in the United States', in *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross Culturally*, eds. Judy Brink and Joan Mencher, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, 67.

- 52 Ibid., 70.
- 53 For example, many people in the congregation she examined thought 'the church roof would fall in if a woman preached'. Ingersoll, 66.
- 54 Ibid., 70-75.
- 55 This is how she describes this epiphany: 'I became aware that as a woman I'd been on my knees my whole life and not really known it. Most of all, I ached for the woman in me who had not yet been born, though I couldn't have told you then the reason for the ache'. She further describes her feelings accompanying the awakening as 'too heavy to move', 'too dazed to be angry', or 'disillusioned, sad, betrayed'. Kidd, 11 and 50, respectively.
- 56 Kidd, 13.
- 57 Ibid., 18-19.
- 58 Ibid., 19.

easily ignored. The author writes, 'At present, it appears that the more the feminists attempt to challenge the limits placed on them by the denomination, the more clearly those limits are set'.⁵² Their vulnerability and the subversive nature of their actions is underscored by the fact that throughout the essay Stocks uses pseudonyms and provides vague information about the investigated denomination. She notes that if at any moment the feminists' newsletter was abolished by the all-male board, their only choice would be to cease its publication or risk excommunication.

Julie Ingersoll's research investigates the most contested idea of women in the position of leadership. She draws from Joy Charlton, who explored experiences of the first generation of clergywomen and found that they had been met with hostile behaviour from male pastors and even experienced situations akin to sexual harassment. Ingersoll also interviewed evangelical women in the positions of leadership and found that they encounter resistance not only from male pastors but also from the congregation.⁵³ She learned that female pastors are usually relegated to subordinate roles, are paid less, and lack decision-making power. Women also face discrimination in hiring and promoting at Christian academies and even experience subtle disrespect practices from students (such as addressing female professors by their first names or by 'Mrs.' instead of 'Dr.', challenging their legitimacy, or even resisting taking classes from female professors).⁵⁴

Such experiences frequently result in dramatic decisions evangelical feminists feel compelled to make. Sue Monk Kidd is an example of a woman whose life changed radically because of feminism. She was frustrated by the gradation of power in marriage and by being considered sinful and secondary in church. In her book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, she tells a story of her 'immense journey' from her roots in the Southern Baptist Church 'into the Sacred Feminine'. She calls the two years of this transition her 'awakening', her 'disenchantment', and her 'ripeness'.⁵⁵ When she 'awakens', she realises she had spent most of her life 'trying to live up to the stereotypical formula of what a woman should be—the Good Christian Woman, the Good Wife, the Good Mother, the Good Daughter—pursuing those things that have always been held out to women as ideals of femininity'.⁵⁶

Before her awakening Kidd had thought of herself as an independent woman, but now she thinks she was an 'unambiguous woman'.⁵⁷ This term was coined by Deborah Cameron and refers to a woman who always defers to male authority or 'the cultural father'. Kidd writes that although she had her life and career, 'inside I was still caught in daughterhood. I was deferring to the father at the center. . . . I had no idea the extend to which my ideas were really the internalized notions of a culture that put men at the center'.⁵⁸ During two years of her awakening, Kidd felt an immense conflict that influenced her marriage and her church life. On the one hand, her Southern Baptist world seemed to be her whole realm; on the other, she started to feel that she did not share its principles and did not belong there. Leaving her church and changing her life was extremely

difficult, however, even 'unfathomable'.⁵⁹ Therefore, her first stage of change was deflecting to the Episcopal Church, which seemed to her to be a more inclusive and egalitarian institution, 'more compatible'. But this transition would not be enough. Kidd felt the problem lay deeper. She felt she could not defer to the male authority any longer but 'needed a sacred space free of the stain of sexism with core imagery that embraced the feminine, a space that welcomed women to places of power, engaged them fully as equals, and helped to heal their wound and empower their lives'.⁶⁰ She needed to move beyond religion in a patriarchal institution. And so, she embarked on what she called the journey to find her Sacred Feminine. Her religiosity found its best expression in the New Age movement.

Janet McCrickard went through a similar spiritual journey although with a different conclusion. After seventeen years in the evangelical movement, she formed her feminist critique, stirred away from religion, and turned to 'Goddess revival'; she now calls herself a secular feminist. She went through the stages Kidd describes but did not stay with the Goddess movement. She saw it as parallel to evangelicalism – both were revivalist, offered a cure for anxiety and insecurity in the face of change, and provided her with a sense of belonging. McCrickard claims her choice resulted from the fact that 'the radically powerless and oppressed often resort to the occult as the only means of power and importance left to them – and the only means of revenge'.⁶¹ Seen in this light, the Goddess revival became to her just another fundamentalism, akin to Christianity. In the face of these two antithetical movements, she found her true self could be retained only by staying secular.

Maxine Hanks is a feminist Mormon who has also struggled to retrieve her spiritual self. Her book *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* that explored the history of Mormon women was met with accusations of apostasy.⁶² She described the gender imbalance of power as flowing from the cultural beliefs of the community and not from the God's plan. She could never express her concerns in the church, however, so she decided to share them on the public forum. When she published her book, she was first warned and then excommunicated by the Mormon Church leaders.⁶³ Hanks does not dispute the justifiability of her excommunication but thinks it 'was a small price to pay for my voice. It didn't take away my theology or my spirituality, which the church does not control'.⁶⁴ Hanks is an example of hundreds of Mormon women who voice their dissatisfaction with barring women from priesthood, but do not have power to win the battle. She and Courtney Black have written, "These are our choices: to conform, to risk church discipline, or to leave".⁶⁵ This statement testifies to Mormon feminists' powerlessness in winning their battle.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott is an example of evangelical feminist who claims that these two opposing positions are possible to reconcile. She is a very active and prolific evangelical feminist writer. She speaks out by publishing books, preaching, and conducting a website.⁶⁶ She openly writes about her fundamentalist past and how she came out to identify herself as

59 Ibid., 48.

60 Kidd, 80.

61 Janet E. McCrickard, "Born-Again Moon: Fundamentalism in Christianity and the Feminist Spirituality Movement," *Feminist Review* 37, 1991, pp. 59–67.

62 Maxine Hanks, *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism*, Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1992.

63 In 1993 Hanks became one of the 'September Six' excommunicated by the LDS church for writing about topics relating to Mormon women.

64 <http://www.lds-mormon.com/women.shtml>.

65 <http://www.aliveonline.com/ldspapers/Feminism.htm>.

66 She also served as a stylistic consultant for the New International Version of the Bible and was a member of the National Council of Churches' Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee.

67 Mollenkott further describes her position as 'a member of the evangelical left, working with other Christian feminists toward a world in which all people are respected and cherished as made in God's image, and in which the natural environment is respected and cherished as being created and sustained by one Great Spirit'. See www.virginiarameymollenkott.com.

68 For instance, in her book, *Sensuous Spirituality: Out from Fundamentalism*, she uses the generic feminine pronouns *she* and *her* and includes heterosexism as one of the 'sinful -isms'. See Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Sensuous Spirituality: Out from Fundamentalism* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 12.

69 www.virginiarameymollenkott.com.

70 Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reformed and Feminist: A Challenge to the Church*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991, 101.

71 R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

72 See Ingersoll, 24.

73 *Ibid.*, 65.

a lesbian evangelical feminist. She calls herself 'an Evangelical Universalist'.⁶⁷ In her books, Mollenkott expresses her theological reflections on the bible and religion, and puts herself within the religious dialogue on gender. She strongly advocates using inclusive language.⁶⁸ She views the self and the Divine as spiritual and mystical and sees social change coming from the self. Mollenkott claims that feminism and faith in her life 'empower one another'. She believes evangelical feminism is possible because feminism and religion have similar goals: respecting others, correcting injustices, and treating others in ways we like to be treated. In Mollenkott's words, if 'feminism means working toward a peaceful, egalitarian, humane world, . . . [and] being a follower of Jesus means the same thing, . . . [then] feminism is both a religious and a political expression of our convictions'.⁶⁹

Accordingly, Johanna van Wijk-Bos believes that Christian feminism is possible. Her book, *Reformed and Feminist: A Challenge to the Church*, describes her personal journey that allowed her to see feminism as compatible with Christianity, particularly in a Reformed Protestant light. According to van Wijk-Bos, the gender struggle continues because of the sin of patriarchy and its destructive results. She advocates defiance toward these patriarchal structures seeing a resolution in forming alliances between women within the church 'on behalf of structural change and liberation' and providing Ruth and Naomi as examples for the women of today.⁷⁰

There are other examples of communities where women successfully find their place within evangelical subculture. In *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Marie Griffith explores the practical side of the doctrine of submission as implemented and lived out by Pentecostal women.⁷¹ She shows ways in which these women find freedom and empowerment in submission. At the same time, she acknowledges the difference between this empowerment in inverted submission and equality as defined by feminists. Griffith notes the women's inability to express anger because they live in the 'therapeutic culture' and their lack of control in the face of the all male board of advisors, but interestingly does not elaborate on these problems.

The women Griffith examined serve as a testimony that for some women there might be empowerment in submission; however, for others, the religious gendered world is limiting and frustrating. Some of the women Julie Ingersoll interviewed were not bothered at all by discontinuities between what was preached from the pulpit and their own decisions about their role in the church and in their families.⁷² That notwithstanding, many women feel discomfort and self-doubt or, as one interviewee called it, 'this conservative evangelical spiritual guilt'.⁷³ What follows is a common chain reaction: after questioning themselves, women seek the support of sympathetic male and female ministers, discover biblical feminist interpretations of the bible, and respond by either staying in their denominations and becoming stronger or leaving.

Leaving the denomination is a very difficult step for feminist women. Not only does it cause deep anxiety and depression but also often means cutting off community and family ties. Therefore, more conservative Christian feminist women develop strategies for managing the conflict. They find or create support networks in their congregations and in the evangelical feminist organisations, attend conferences, publish, find individual mentors, and develop friendships with other women ministers. Their husbands' support is also very important as it thwarts accusations of lesbianism and a pro-abortion standpoint. But evangelical feminists also try to negotiate their image by developing a more feminine style and not being threatening to men. They avoid the label 'feminist' and try to shun conflicts and tensions by using humour. Finally, evangelical feminists aim not to be a source of controversy, set a good example of female leadership, and assert that they do not advocate for women's rights.

Many of these tactics, however, are too compromising for some evangelical feminists. By rejecting them they almost choose not to succeed in their efforts to reconcile the internal conflict. As Sue Monk Kidd or Janet McCrickard's testimonies show, the dissonance becomes too strong, and they decide to move to other Christian denominations, such as Episcopalian, or more women-centred religions, such as New Age. Their other choice is to leave religion altogether and become secular agnostics or even atheists.

When put together, it seems that each of the evangelical women presented in this paper stands for a different kind of evangelical feminism, depending on how she reconciles what she believes about the bible and her identity. Each woman seeks to find her own way to harmonise these two and each tries to create her own identity. Some of them put more stress on their evangelicalism; others emphasise their feminist views. In this process of negotiation they create entirely new paradigms for feminism and evangelicalism. Suspended between the two, they bend their boundaries, set new criteria of inclusiveness, and create new understandings, new definitions and new reality.

In creating their identities as both evangelical and feminist, in their ambivalences, challenges and tensions, American evangelical feminists fit philosopher Luce Irigaray's idea of a woman who 'resists all adequate definition'.⁷⁴ Although some of them might not necessarily agree, they seem neither wholly evangelical nor entirely feminist, as these two ideologies consider themselves to exist on the ultimate conceptual poles. They seem never complete, but constantly becoming; because they are 'flowing', 'fluctuating', and 'blurring' beings, they defy confinement within any system. Their transgressive nature becomes their tool that has proved capable of rattling the base of traditional evangelical patriarchy.⁷⁵ Thus, what is usually perceived as weakness – being ambivalent, flowing, and incomplete – becomes the evangelical feminists' power and strength. Paraphrasing Walt Whitman's poetic words that introduced the essay, American evangelical feminists do contradict themselves. So what? They are large. They contain multitudes.

74 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, 26.

75 In 'The 'Mechanics' of Fluids', Luce Irigaray argues that men, who are 'solid', cannot comprehend, and therefore control, the 'fluid'. In order to get a hold of women as objects of desire, men need to transform them from fluid to solid, thus sealing 'the triumph of rationality'. In: Irigaray, 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids', in: *This Sex*, 106–118.

References

<http://www.eewc.com>.

<http://www.cbeinternational.org>.

<http://www.cbmw.org>.

<http://www.lds-mormon.com/women.shtml>.

<http://www.aliveonline.com/ldspapers/Feminism.htm>.

<http://www.virginiarameymollenkott.com>.

Liftin, A. Duane (1979), 'Evangelical Feminism: Why Traditionalists Reject It' *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July-September, pp. 258–271.

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey (1987) (ed.), *Women of Faith in Dialogue*, New York: Crossroad.

Russel, Letty M., (ed.) (1985), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Slee, Nicola (2003), *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Stacey, Judith, and Susan Elizabeth Gerard (1990), "'We Are Not Doormats': The Influence of Feminism on Contemporary Evangelicals in the United States', in F. Ginsburg, A.L. Tsing, *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 98–117.

Wilson, Lois Miriam (1992), *Telling Her Story: Theology out of Women's Struggles*, Toronto, Canada: The United Church Publishing House.

Suggested citation

Sowinska, A. (2007), 'Ambiguous women: Debates within American evangelical feminism', *European Journal of American Culture* 26: 3, pp. 167–180, doi: [10.1386/ejac.26.3.167/1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.26.3.167/1)

Contributor details

Alicja Sowinska is a doctoral candidate in the Department of American Studies at Saint Louis University, where she also received a Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies. Her research interests include politics of representation, visual culture, feminism, and cold war history. She has published two articles on Josephine Baker's and Frida Kahlo's self-representations. Her dissertation is an analysis of cultural perceptions and rhetorical and visual constructions of Eastern Europe in America. Contact: Alicja Sowinska, 28 Gainsborough Close, Torquay, Devon, TQ1 2SB, UK.

E-mail: shyshkaus@yahoo.com