



Book Reviews

from *EEWC Update* and *Christian Feminism Today*

Vol. 31. No. 2 Summer (July–September) 2007

Being Feminist, Being Christian: Essays from Academia

Edited by Allyson Jule and Bettina Tate Pedersen.
New York and Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
213 pages.

Reviewed by Anne Eggebrotten, Ph.D

There aren't many Christians today thinking and speaking within the academic world of gender studies.

If you are one of them, this book is for you.

If not, you may find the technical terms difficult: anti-essentialism, autonomous subjectivity, gender performance, linguistic space.

For those of us who live in this world, *Being Feminist, Being Christian: Essays from Academia* is extremely valuable and long overdue.

Reading it is like attending an EEWC conference: you brush up on current issues within feminism and theology and also learn about the tremendous contributions of Christian women in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that led to the flourishing of first-wave feminism in the nineteenth century.

Refreshingly, this book doesn't dwell on the religious and cultural wars gripping the US today. Four of the eight studies come out of the Holiness tradition, looking at Susanna Wesley, Phoebe Palmer, and radical Protestantism in early modern times, as well as feminism on a Nazarene campus today. Three of the authors write from a Canadian context. Evangelicalism is discussed in only two of the essays.

Note that the title of this book does not have a question mark. To ask if it's possible to be a Christian and a feminist is so1970. The women writing these essays start from the position of "Okay, we're it. How do we understand our position within the context of current feminist theory? How do we dialogue with the Church?"

The easiest-to-read essay in this book is by Carol Blessing and Lisa Bernal Corley about the ways in which women from the Methodist-Holiness tradition in the eighteenth century "struggled, defied, and challenged patriarchal practices and structures of the Christian church." (Because it's historical, this essay doesn't have the theoretical jargon.)

Not allowed to preach from the pulpit, Susannah Wesley led a prayer meeting of up to two hundred in her kitchen; her successor, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, taught in a barn outfitted for church services, which became known as "Mrs. Fletcher's Room." Her disciple, Mary Tooth, likewise created an "alternative sacred space" she called her Upper Room. I loved reading about these women. The essay ends with a discussion of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rebecca Chopp, who, like the eighteenth century women, refuse to "anoint patriarchal values embedded in biblical texts with divine authority..." (p.150).

The other historical essay, by Holly Faith Nelson, explains how medieval and early-modern women in the church “subverted essentialist ontology, critiqued patriarchal discourse, generated proto-feminist theologies and ecclesiologies, and fashioned themselves mirrors and agents of the divine” (p.177). We need to know these women in order to stand firm today.

For me the most exciting essay in the book was Diane Leclerc’s comparison of Phoebe Palmer and Luce Irigaray, an important voice in French feminist theory. Leclerc explains that in earlier centuries, women often had to become “symbolic males” to gain a voice in the church—they had to remain single and not bear children. But Phoebe Palmer gained a powerful speaking voice while also being a very “feminine” wife and mother. In addition, Palmer had the striking insight that excessive preoccupation with home and family had been a sinful obstacle to her spiritual growth and service to God. In some ways similar to Palmer, Irigaray insists that women should not try to be like men in order to gain a voice in public discourse.

In her essay, “In Search of Bodily Perspective,” Elizabeth Powell notes that the physical body plays a big role within Christian theology as well as within feminist debate. Christians talk about “denying the flesh” but also about “the resurrection of the body.” Feminists argue over whether female or male embodiment necessarily results in different thinking. (This is the essentialist/anti-essentialist debate, with Simon de Beauvoir and early 1970s feminism associated with the anti-essentialist position and Irigaray associated with the essentialist position.) Powell discusses these issues and calls her conclusion “Toward Christian Embodiments of Feminist Theory.” She uses Irigaray’s new definition of virginity as women’s “right to protect their moral, spiritual, and physical inviolability, an autonomous identity status...” (100).

Allyson Jule reports on her linguistic study of female silence in two large lecture classes at an evangelical theology school in Canada. She notes that both Christianity and feminism purport to give women the opportunity to become fully human, but in actuality we put on gender roles “like costumes” (55). In her conclusion, she asks, “Do Christian women in various church-related contexts rehearse themselves into voicelessness?” Her answer: “...the liberation specifically advertised in evangelicalism... contradicts some of the lived experiences of women in such circles” (56).

Two of the essays focus on personal development and reflections within a theoretical context. Bettina Tate Pedersen argues that calling ourselves “Christian feminists” rather than “feminist Christians” may cause us to “skirt the hard questions and realities of sexist oppression recorded in the Christian tradition itself, perpetuated in ongoing Christian practice, and ubiquitous in the wide world” (29). Linda Beail wrestles with the imperatives on motherhood we inherit from Christianity, feminism, and our culture.

The editors include one man’s voice in their book. Christopher Noble challenges the idea of “literal” biblical interpretation, using Genesis 1:26-28 as a case in point and applying feminist critical theory to this passage. Until we can all agree on gender construction and what “male” and “female” really mean, we will have differences in even a literal reading of this important text, that “in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them” (KJV).

For Christians who identify as feminist today, this book is not to be missed. It’s like getting the best of a conference—eight great lectures—but you don’t have the expense of travel and hotels.



[Table of Contents](#)



Dr. Anne Eggebroten is a founding member of EEWC and teaches Women and Religion at California State University, Northridge. She heard three of these lectures in 2004 at a meeting of the Conference on Christianity & Literature, West Coast Division, held at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, California

© 2007 Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus