

Preeminent feminist Gloria Steinem once called religion ‘politics in the sky’, citing just how important it is within the feminist movement.¹ Although looking at religion in the context of feminism often focuses on Evangelical anti-feminists, religion and feminism have been intertwined since the movement’s beginnings.² While this essay focuses on second-wave feminism, commonly thought to have begun after the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and lasting through the 1980s, the second wave was deeply influenced by the first, which was mostly the effort of Christian women.³ The relationship between religion and feminism has also been extremely complicated since the first wave, with many different religious perspectives coming into play during the nineteenth century.⁴ By the mid-1970s, the second wave was in full swing, and this conflict continued, with women debating just how far to take their feminist reforms of the church.⁵ However, despite their differences, second-wave feminists all wanted their voices to be heard, to be seen as people, and this was especially clear within a religious context. Even though there were significant challenges to their reforms, feminists of the second wave were able to reshape their religions to give themselves more agency.

Before looking into the successes and strategies of the feminists, it is important to understand the arguments of the people who opposed them. Religion was often used as a weapon

¹ Claudia Setzer, ‘The Bible and the Legacy of First Wave Feminism’, in *The Bible in American Life*, eds. Philip Goff, Arthur E Farnsley, and Peter Thuesen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 183-191, Oxford Academic.

² Laura Foxworth, “‘No More Silence!’: Feminist Activism and Religion in the Second Wave”, in *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, eds. Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 81, Springer Link.

³ Barbara Brown Zikmund, ‘Gender Matters: How Second-Wave Feminism Shaped and Reshaped American Religion’, in *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, and New Directions*, ed. Charles H Lippy (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 132. Kathleen McPhillips, ‘Contested Feminisms: Women’s Religious Leadership and the Politics of Contemporary Western Feminism’, *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016): 135.

⁴ Setzer, ‘The Bible and the Legacy of First Wave Feminism’, 183-191.

⁵ Marjorie J Spruill, ‘Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and The Rise of a New Southern Strategy in the 1970s’, in *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, eds. Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 41, Springer Link. Brown Zikmund, ‘Gender Matters’, 145.

by anti-feminists, with the claim that feminism was damaging to the traditional American Christian family.⁶ One of the most prominent anti-feminists, Phyllis Schlafly, used specific Bible passages to back up what she called women's 'natural role' as subservient wife.⁷ Schlafly also tapped into groups such as Southern Protestants and Evangelicals by focusing on how their faith, femininity, and family values intertwined, and why feminism was a threat to that bond.⁸ Another way in which second-wave feminists were challenged by religion was in the debate surrounding abortion. The Catholic church was one of the most vehement opponents of abortion during the time, but there were other religious groups who fought as well.⁹ Orthodox Jewish women in particular were resistant to change, despite there being many prominent Jewish feminists, including Betty Friedan herself.¹⁰ The right to legal abortions was a key belief within the feminist movement, and their victory in 1973's *Roe v. Wade* caused an outrage among different religious communities, namely fundamentalist Protestants, who believed in traditional interpretations of the Bible.¹¹ It was during this time that anti-feminism became aligned with the Republican party, giving feminists' opponents power on a national stage.¹² This change came about due to a number of factors, namely Democratic President Jimmy Carter's feminist agenda.¹³ The idea of the 'religious right' was solidified during the Reagan Era, however, with Reagan's Christian enthusiasm drawing in many religious anti-feminists.¹⁴ The association of feminism with other Republican fears such as communism and abortion only added to the voice of the right as

⁶ Spruill, 'Feminism, Anti-Feminism', 50.

⁷ Laura Foxworth, "'No More Silence!': Feminist Activism and Religion in the Second Wave", in *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, eds. Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 80, Springer Link.

⁸ Spruill, 'Feminism, Anti-Feminism', 43, 52.

⁹ Deborah L Vess, 'A Baby or a Fetus? The Abortion Debate in America', in *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, and New Directions*, ed. Charles H Lippy (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 164.

¹⁰ Brown Zikmund, 'Gender Matters', 140-141.

¹¹ Ibid. Vess, 'A Baby or a Fetus?', 164, 167.

¹² Spruill, 'Feminism, Anti-Feminism', 60.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 52. Vess, 'A Baby or a Fetus?', 169.

anti-feminist.¹⁵ Religion was prominent in anti-feminist arguments, and though this gives the black-and-white illusion that feminism versus anti-feminism was a war between the secular and the religious, there is much more nuance than that. Many feminists were religious themselves, and used feminist principles to give themselves more agency within their faith.

Some less radical feminists stayed committed to the church, focusing on God's power and love rather than hierarchies and male dominance. Letty M Russell was especially prominent in this field of thought, expressing the idea that God could guide people to justice and equality.¹⁶ Russell had her share of hardships as a woman in the church which influenced her feminist principles; she had to appeal to study at Harvard Divinity School and became one of the only women there during the 1950s.¹⁷ Despite her extensive theological work, she was never given the same recognition as men in her field.¹⁸ However, Russell remained steadfast in her faith, making connections between key Christian tenants of love and hospitality and women's equality.¹⁹ Elizabeth Farian also focused on God as a singular power, criticising the way men in the church tried to take ownership of Him.²⁰ She equated men's power in the church as elevating themselves to a godlike status and making people worship them with idolatry, a sin according to the Bible.²¹ She rejected this 'phallic worship' and, like Russell, went back to God, criticising the patriarchal nature of the church while still focusing on faith.²² Both Farian and Russell are examples of feminists who stayed close to the church while exercising feminist ideas— many other religious women, however, went beyond the church, introducing brand-new ideas.

¹⁵ Spruill, 'Feminism, Anti-Feminism', 42-43.

¹⁶ Judith Ann Brady, 'Letty M. Russell: A Feminist Liberation Approach to Educating for Justice', *Religious Education* 103, no. 2 (Apr 2008): 181

¹⁷ Ibid. 191.

¹⁸ Ibid. 190.

¹⁹ Ibid. 180.

²⁰ Melissa Raphael, 'A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion', *Sophia* 53 no. 2 (Jun 2014): 250.

²¹ Ibid. 248.

²² Ibid. 245.

Second-wave feminism saw a rise in feminist interpretations of the Bible, which allowed them to discover more power within their religions. ‘Women have always interpreted the Bible’ writes feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, citing the Bible’s central importance in the relationship between feminism and religion.²³ In a 1987 article, Gloria Steinem talks about the importance of breaking down patriarchal hierarchies, namely the Christian church.²⁴ Many feminists took this principle to heart, beginning with Biblical interpretation. Emphasising the stories solely focused on women, such as Ruth and Esther, was an obvious first step, but it was during mid-to-late twentieth century that theologians began to look deeper for feminist messages within the sacred text.²⁵ There were different ways to reconcile the misogyny of the Bible with feminist readings; some looked at the texts within their historical contexts, while others began a movement to ‘depatriarchalise’ the Bible, revealing the text as neutral but co-opted by the patriarchy.²⁶ In *Woman in the Bible*, Mary Evans reinterprets the text rather than rejecting it altogether, as some more radical feminists did.²⁷ Steinem also talks about how the movement to portray God as a man rather than a force was what created a patriarchal dominance over women in the church.²⁸ Theologian Daphne Hampson also brings up the problem of God’s (and Christ’s) maleness, citing it as one of her main issues with the church.²⁹ This problem was sometimes remedied by the feminist reading of God creating *both* man and woman ‘in his image’, erasing his maleness.³⁰ The creation myth was a ripe place for feminists to look for new interpretations,

²³ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Bible Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 22.

²⁴ Gloria Steinem, ‘Humanism and the Second Wave of Feminism’, *Humanist* 47, no. 3 (Jun 1987): 12.

²⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 22.

²⁶ Ibid. 23. Deborah F Sawyer, ‘Gender’, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F A Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 470, VleBooks.

²⁷ Sawyer, ‘Gender’, 467.

²⁸ Steinem, ‘Humanism and the Second Wave of Feminism’, 11.

²⁹ Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 75.

³⁰ Foxworth, “‘No More Silence!’”, 79.

with the framing of Eve as a victim of the patriarchy being especially potent.³¹ By reinterpreting the Bible through a feminist lens, women were able to reshape religion from a patriarchal hierarchy to a space that could support equality.

Another movement rising in time with second-wave feminism was women taking direct power within the church, which allowed them even more agency. Barbara Brown Zikmun notes that in many Western religions, leadership is often male, but females are the more devoted subjects.³² She also argues, however, that women take on many roles in the running of the church behind the scenes.³³ The shift during second-wave feminism was from behind the scenes to the forefront— this often came in the form of female church leadership. Russell, along with being a scholar, was also a pastor.³⁴ Like the rapidly growing number of women ordained between the 1950s and the 1970s, Russell rejected the hierarchies and male dominance of the church.³⁵ During the twentieth century, arguments within the church about the ordination of women made many religious women question other institutions and gender roles more broadly, leading them to feminism.³⁶ New groups also formed around this debate: sects of Judaism broke off over the question of whether they should allow female rabbis or not.³⁷ Although female leadership within the church was still uncommon by the ‘end’ of second-wave feminism, it was another strategy women employed to transform religion into an equal playing field and give themselves power within their faith.

Finally, the importance of minority religious groups cannot be understated in the process of women gaining agency during second-wave feminism. Chief among these groups are Jewish

³¹ Holly Morse, ‘The First Woman Question: Eve and the Women’s Movement’, in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 61-80, Oxford Academic.

³² Brown Zikmund, ‘Gender Matters’, 129.

³³ Ibid. 143.

³⁴ Brady, ‘Letty M. Russell’, 191.

³⁵ Ibid. Brown Zikmund, ‘Gender Matters’, 139.

³⁶ Brown Zikmund, ‘Gender Matters’, 134.

³⁷ Ibid. 140.

women, who played a key part in feminism. Jewish women were especially drawn to feminism as it often intersected with antisemitism in the conservative belief that feminism was a ‘jew conspiracy’.³⁸ Betty Friedan’s writing was a direct response to her suburban Jewish upbringing, similar to the work of Jewish feminists Bella Abzug and Judith Plaskow.³⁹ Jewish women also tended to be well-educated, which made them gravitate toward intellectual causes such as feminism and produce more writing in support of it.⁴⁰ Specific issues of gender within Judaism also caused women to question other institutions, such as gender-segregated seating within synagogues.⁴¹ Feminist organisations based around synagogues and temples were some of the most militant within the movement during the later half of the twentieth century.⁴² Mormon feminist groups were also another sector that used their faith to promote feminism, despite huge pushback from much of the Mormon community, with Sonia Johnson being excommunicated for her feminist views in 1979.⁴³ Mormon women were inspired by hearing stories of women in their history resisting its patriarchal structure; their feminism came only when they applied the theory to their personal experiences.⁴⁴ There were also many intersectional feminist religious groups, often uniting people of different faiths for the first time.⁴⁵ Elizabeth Farians helped found the Task Force on Women and Religion in 1967 as a chapter of the National Organization for

³⁸ Spruill, ‘Feminism, Anti-Feminism’, 57. Joyce Antler, “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’: Radical Feminism and Jewish Women’, in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, eds. Rachel Kranson, Shira Kohn, and Hasia Diner (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 227, De Gruyter.

³⁹ Daniel Horowitz, ‘Jewish Women Remaking American Feminism/ Women Remaking American Judaism: Reflections on the Life of Betty Friedan’, in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, eds. Rachel Kranson, Shira Kohn, and Hasia Diner (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 236, 244, De Gruyter.

⁴⁰ Antler, “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’”, 212.

⁴¹ Laura S Levitt, ‘Judaism and Gender’, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D Wright (Elsevier, 2015), 875-878, ScienceDirect.

⁴² Brown Zikmund, ‘Gender Matters’, 133. Antler, “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’”, 226.

⁴³ Foxworth, “‘No More Silence!’”, 85.

⁴⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, ‘Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism’, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 55, 59.

⁴⁵ Foxworth, “‘No More Silence!’”, 85.

Women (NOW), which was a way for women of many faiths to connect.⁴⁶ Another similar organisation was People of Faith for the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), founded by Rev Diane Moseley.⁴⁷ Finally, and more recently, in her book *Visual Habits*, Rebecca Sullivan argues that nuns also gained power as the result of second-wave feminism by questioning their place within society and combining piety with social justice.⁴⁸ Nuns were in a unique position in that they were part of a traditionally patriarchal system yet had complete agency within their faith.⁴⁹ Being a nun was a way to define womanhood beyond men or family, a way of thinking only spurred on by second-wave feminism and the counterculture.⁵⁰ Although there was a broader focus on the church in general, smaller religious groups were instrumental in organising and campaigning for second-wave feminism and increased control within their religions.

Feminists of the mid-twentieth century faced many challenges to their beliefs in a patriarchal world. The church is a microcosm of this patriarchal hierarchy, and was often the centre of misogyny. Women, however, were able to take the principles of feminism and apply them to religion, giving them power within this structure and changing it forever. But not all women could come to terms with the church the way it stood; Daphne Hampson broke with Christianity in favour of feminism, saying the two were not compatible.⁵¹ For some feminists, any amount of change within the church will never be enough. This essay also does not touch on the intersection of feminism, religion, and marginalised identities within the United States. Second-wave feminism may have originally been defined by white, educated women, but by the end it encompassed women as a whole.⁵² In the black community, progress was slower because

⁴⁶ Ibid. 74.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 85.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Sullivan, *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 16, De Gruyter.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 10.

⁵¹ Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 2.

⁵² Brown Zikmund, 'Gender Matters', 146.

women felt they had to choose between the issues of misogyny and racism, often focusing on the latter as a more immediate problem.⁵³ Eastern Orthodox Christianity also saw little progress due to discrimination.⁵⁴ Intersectionality became one of the main issues of third and fourth-wave feminism, an issue that continues into the present day.⁵⁵ Feminism and religion are still intertwined, and their joint journey is far from over.

⁵³ Ibid. 142.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 146.

⁵⁵ Sawyer, 'Gender', 475.

Bibliography

- Antler, Joyce. “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’: Radical Feminism and Jewish Women’. In *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, edited by Rachel Kranson, Shira Kohn, and Hasia Diner, 210-234. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010. De Gruyter.
- Brady, Judith Ann. ‘Letty M. Russell: A Feminist Liberation Approach to Educating for Justice’. *Religious Education* 103, no. 2 (Apr 2008): 179-195.
- Foxworth, Laura. “‘No More Silence!’: Feminist Activism and Religion in the Second Wave’. In *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, edited by Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, 71-96. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Springer Link.
- Hampson, Daphne. *Theology and Feminism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Horowitz, Daniel. ‘Jewish Women Remaking American Feminism/ Women Remaking American Judaism: Reflections on the Life of Betty Friedan’. In *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, edited by Rachel Kranson, Shira Kohn, and Hasia Diner, 235-247. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010. De Gruyter.
- Levitt, Laura S. ‘Judaism and Gender’. In *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by James D Wright, 875-878. Elsevier, 2015. ScienceDirect.
- McPhillips, Kathleen. ‘Contested Feminisms: Women’s Religious Leadership and the Politics of Contemporary Western Feminism’. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016): 134-49.
- Morse, Holly. ‘The First Woman Question: Eve and the Women’s Movement’. In *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood, 61-80. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Oxford Academic.

- Raphael, Melissa. 'A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion'. *Sophia* 53 no. 2 (Jun 2014): 241-259.
- Sawyer, Deborah F. 'Gender'. In *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, edited by John F A Sawyer, 464-479. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. VleBooks.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Bible Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Setzer, Claudia. 'The Bible and the Legacy of First Wave Feminism'. In *The Bible in American Life*, edited by Philip Groff, Arthur E Farnsley, and Peter Thuesen, 183-191. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Oxford Academic.
- Spruill, Marjorie J. 'Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and The Rise of a New Southern Strategy in the 1970s'. In *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, edited by Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, 39-69. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Springer Link.
- Steinem, Gloria. 'Humanism and the Second Wave of Feminism'. *Humanist* 47, no. 3 (Jun 1987): 11-49.
- Thatcher Ulrich, Laurel. 'Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism'. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 45-63.
- Sullivan, Rebecca. *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. De Gruyter.
- Vess, Deborah L. 'A Baby or a Fetus? The Abortion Debate in America'. In *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, and New Directions*, edited by Charles H Lippy 164-169. Westport: Prager, 2006.

Zikmund Brown, Barbara. 'Gender Matters: How Second-Wave Feminism Shaped and Reshaped American Religion'. In *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, and New Directions*, edited by Charles H Lippy 129-146. Westport: Prager, 2006.