Facing Challenges

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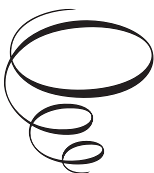
Feminism in Christian Higher Education and Other Places

Edited by

Allyson Jule and Bettina Tate Pedersen

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This collection of essays is dedicated to our students who teach us much and to our colleagues in higher education and the church who have worked hard in creating environments in which the full flourishing of the entire Christian community can be nurtured.

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Allyson Jule and Bettina Tate Pedersen

INTRODUCTION

ALLYSON JULE AND BETTINA TATE PEDERSEN

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it might be reasonable to ask why another collection of essays on feminism would be needed. It is true that feminism is not a new development, and it is true that the effects of the feminist critiques in the past century have changed many things about our lives in Western society. It might also seem true that the answer to this query, coming from the wider context of secular society, might be significantly different from that deriving from a Christian context. While in some cases the answers are different, in many cases they are not. Further, as the differing political contexts across Western societies reveal, there are significant variances in what women can expect from different national contexts.

The purpose in our collection is not to survey all the differing terrains of feminist efforts, successful or failed, across the breadth of US, Canadian, and UK societies; rather, we have chosen to focus on the Christian context in which we and our contributors live and work. Our focus is on the ways in which feminism continues to meet resistance from our Christian institutions and communities. The contexts addressed by the contributors here primarily include colleges, universities, and churches. Within these contexts, we describe the ongoing challenges we face as feminists with our students, with our colleagues, with our pastors, with our fellow congregants, with our peers, with our friends, with our families.

We choose to frame these discussions as challenges we face rather than as balances we have achieved because the notion of balancing can suggest that we have reached a sort of happy equilibrium, and others may attain it as well. We also note that the idea of balancing, understood as "having it all," has been critiqued and rejected by some feminists coming of age in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, who are responding to what they perceive as an excessive rejection from second-wave feminism of domains, activities, and roles more traditionally associated with femininity, and/or who believe that feminism means the freedom to reject a professional career outside the home and to choose the role of wife and mother exclusively. The frame of "facing" challenges rather than "balancing"

them also allows contributors to address the reality of token feminism in place of a transforming feminist vision and praxis within Christian institutions and communities. While we do acknowledge that feminist progress has been made over the course of our lifetimes, we also mean to suggest in gathering together the feminist voices in this collection that regardless of what wave of feminism with which contributors or readers align themselves, challenges to a feminist perspective, praxis, or critique persist.

To our colleagues in secular institutions and communities this claim would seem too much of a truism to warrant the publication of another book on feminism. Within the context of Christian schools and churches, however, nothing about feminism, feminist critique, or feminist achievement should be easily passed off. Indeed, the vast majority of our students, colleagues, and peer worshippers have yet to engage even the most basic feminist questions or caricatures. Questions about what feminism actually is, questions about whether or not media stereotypes are accurate or are themselves a form of sexism, questions about feminist relationships, questions about feminist families and their values, questions about feminist content in university curriculum, questions about language used for God, questions about translations of the Bible that are more gender inclusive, questions about feminist pedagogy, and questions about the shared critiques of oppressive systems that feminism shares with other social justice critiques are some of the basic queries feminism makes. None of these questions have achieved widespread consideration, acceptance, or application within the churches, colleges, and universities from which we and our contributors come.

At this point, it is worth noting that many would say that the primary question of our time is no longer feminism but rather sexuality. We agree that the question of human sexuality is indeed a central question, and we are hopeful that the growing witness of voices about the various expressions of human sexuality within the Christian community will continue to compel us to practice more hospitable welcomings and to initiate more open conversations about sexuality. We also believe that the lack of honest and hospitable engagement with those feminist questions that otherwise could have been probed for the past several decades underlies the very difficulty we currently experience in examining sexuality. Within the context of our grappling with the ongoing challenges of unasked and unresolved questions about feminism, all the contributors here have encountered and will continue to encounter the question of sexuality within our Christian institutions and churches.

This collection contains ten original articles, each connecting in some way with the challenges that feminist scholars face inside Christian higher education and in the Church itself. Included here are the voices of university professors, administrators, and church ministers. All the perspectives come from a long struggle with feminism's place in traditional evangelical Christian universities and colleges and in Christian churches. The order in which these papers appear creates a trajectory that begins with scholarship on words and the power of language, moves to scholarship on teaching, pedagogy and student life on several Christian university campuses, proceeds to scholarship on the difficulties faced by ordained women ministers, and concludes with scholarship that discusses the intersections of feminism, post-colonial critique, and internationality in the context of American Christian higher education. In this way, the collection moves from grounding and foundational ideas necessary to do feminist work at all, but particularly in Christian institutions, to some specific geographical contexts where contributors have faced and analyzed definitive challenges.

The collection opens with Bettina Tate Pedersen's exploration of the importance of the use of the words "feminism" and "feminist" themselves within Christian universities and communities. With so many of today's students distancing themselves from the feminist movement in general and its incarnation in the second wave of the 1960s and 1970s in particular, younger Christian writers have attempted to create post-feminist conversations in which they explore feminism without ever using the term and also in which they promote new concepts of femininity. Such conversations settle on if, why, or how feminism as a political movement is relevant today. This grappling continues to be experienced on Christian campuses. Pedersen's insights into the still misunderstood necessity of feminism in Christian higher education points to the urgency of this collection.

Next Holly Nelson and Alethea Cook's chapter on third- and fourth-wave feminism provides some necessary historical discussion about current iterations of feminism. Nelson and Cook consider how Christianity itself has a tenuous relationship with modern feminist ideas. They examine why Christians often fail to maintain the centrality of feminist ideas inside the Christian Gospel—that Good News is a liberation and completely aligned with the liberating forces of feminism. They achieve this without denying the disagreements that remain inside Christian circles regarding feminism and inside feminist circles regarding Christianity. This tension between secular feminists and evangelical Christians is the focus of their illuminating chapter.

Kendra Wendle Irons's chapter on the problem of language is a compelling discussion linking her personal experiences as a female professor in the theology department of a particularly conservative institution with the attitudes revealed about her presence on campus through critical language moments. In this chapter, she relates having being called a "feminazi" and being mocked in the college paper. Irons uses this individual experience to say something more universal about the persistent sexism that continues to dominate many institutions within the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) community. Her critique of places of Christian higher education unfolds into her hopeful and reasonable request for the CCCU to face the reality and harmful effects of the sexism that persists in their schools and to use their influence to raise awareness of and offer strategies for eliminating sexism in their campus communities.

Robert Doede teaches philosophy at a Christian university. In his chapter, he writes about his pedagogy in a specific course that he has developed and continues to deliver: Feminist Philosophy. Doede locates himself within a journey of coming to a feminist consciousness through the study of philosophy itself. His use of the concept "pedagogy of indirection" provides a way forward regarding facing the challenge of delivering this course to students who live within traditional evangelical communities. Moreover, his experience begs the question of the importance of such a course in the curriculum of all Christian universities and colleges.

Creating and delivering a feminist course is also the focus of Allyson Jule's piece. Describing her university culture and the support that can be found from some administrators, Jule's chapter introduces readers to the challenge she faces in encouraging a seemingly resistant culture to embrace the efforts of feminist scholars and to incorporate feminism into their own course material and teaching outcomes. She discusses her course, Gender and Education, as emerging from within such a community and, drawing on twenty-one questionnaires provided to her students, considers their experience with the course material. Her experience and course also foreground the critical importance of equipping our teacher-education students to positively deal with the students they will encounter in their own professional lives in matters of diversity regarding gender and sexual-orientation.

Priscilla Pope-Levison also writes about her experiences as a professor of theology and provides suggestions for doing feminist work in such a setting and/or on such a subject matter. She offers some helpful steps for successfully facing discomfort with feminism, including getting to know

one's students, providing space in the class for students to identify their own worldview on the topic of feminism, and then telling stories—one's own and, in particular, stories of other women of faith who have propelled Christian faith in significant ways, and in so doing serve as powerful examples to compel a reexamination of feminism's place in Christian communities. Profiling two students enrolled in her class, Pope-Levison compares their views on feminism at the outset with those they offer as they gain growth and insight throughout the course.

A look at how language that demeans women surfaces on a Christian college campus within the student body, how it may be used to undergird hazing practices and excuse harassment, and how it perpetuates insidious sexism even in a millennial generation is an important addition to this book's exploration. Jeff Bolster, as Dean of Student Life on a Christian campus, has a unique insight into students' understanding and behavior regarding gender roles. He writes of his own emerging feminist commitment and of how feminist theory and praxis has helped him shape his campus's vision of student life, use emerging adulthood theory and bystander training to address issues of gender, and create more wholistic and affirming dorm culture, especially in the first-years men's dorm.

Both Rebecca Laird and Janet Wootton address the difficulties women clergy face in being fully recognized in the Church and in gaining the inclusion of women's voices and women's stories in the life and worship practices of the churches in which they have served. Laird's context is North America and Wootton's is Britain. Laird also addresses the devaluing and exclusion of women's voices within Christian higher education, while Wootton explores the long tradition of struggle for women in church leadership and ministry. Both illustrate the connection modern church women have to the deep history of feminism.

Ivy George writes of her experience as a Christian woman of colour from abroad teaching within Christian higher education in the United States. Her circumstances illustrate the complicated, messy, and often conflicting intersections of race, international culture, and Christian worldview produced by a national and cultural context outside of the West. Her essay also critiques a feminism that is little more than tokenism and calls for a deeper assessment of Western views of race, class, and capitalism that are produced in and by Christians in higher education. Though not focused on feminism exclusively, George's essay illustrates well the ongoing need for engagement with feminism to keep its critique sharp and its inclusive vision ever widening to include the many marginalized people of our world.

Returning to our choice of a framework, our emphasis on “facing” rather than “balancing” foregrounds the reality we all face as committed feminists within the global Christian church in raising feminist questions, making feminist critiques, experiencing the resistance to feminist paradigms and values, and implementing feminist pedagogies and/or worship practices. It is a reality that will persist in giving us challenges to face. Rather than succumbing to our inevitable discouragement, we hope to acknowledge for each other and for our readers that we are not alone in the feminist work that we do. We are not alone in facing feminist challenges. We are not alone in the difficulties those challenges bring into our lives. We are not alone in our need for renewed energy to face the challenges. We are not alone in our hope that although we live in the frustration of these challenges to feminism, we are moving incrementally closer to creating a global Christian community in which greater flourishing for women and men may occur.

CHAPTER ONE

FACING WHY WE NEED THE WORDS "FEMINISM" AND "FEMINIST"

BETTINA TATE PEDERSEN

A few years ago in my role as a Literature/Women's Studies professor at a small Christian liberal arts university, I helped to organize a Gender Studies conference around the theme "Conversations toward Wholeness." This theme was designed to facilitate a discussion about the position, progress, and possibilities for women in Christian higher education. The express focus of the conference, to my mind, was to raise the topic of gender within the context of Christian higher education, so it seemed appropriate to use the very words "feminism" and "feminist" in the conference title. While we on the steering committee did include the words themselves in the long list of prompts in the call for papers ("Male Allies, Feminist Men," "Feminism and Christianity," and "Feminist Theory, Theology and Praxis"), in my recollections of our planning meetings the words "feminist" and "feminism" were conspicuously absent from the ideas we discussed for a conference title. These words and their associations were carefully avoided or, when mentioned, seemed to close down dialogue. We chose instead to include many other topic descriptors that did not use these words. Not surprisingly, then, of the proposals submitted for consideration, only two of the approximately seventy proposals even used the words "feminist" or "feminism." The way we danced around these words in our conference theme selection exemplifies the negotiations we make around these words in many domains.

In my particular experience in Christian higher education, the words "feminism" and "feminist" tend to be conspicuously present or absent. Students and faculty either positively or negatively self-identify with the term: "I'm a feminist," or "I'm not a feminist, but…". Phrases such as "Women in Leadership," "Wholeness," "Women in Ministry," "Chilly Climate," or "Balancing" often supplant a direct use or reference to

feminism. These euphemistic phrases actually do a good job of keeping feminism and feminist issues effectively hidden, and this cover can function as an advantage or disadvantage. Sometimes it allows individuals to advance the work of a feminist critique under the radar, so to speak, with the clear aim of achieving it. Even though it is called something else, a feminist critique is effectively being negotiated rather than avoided. In contrast, this euphemistic cover works as a disadvantage when participants do not actually know that an oppressive set of circumstances for women (or any other identified group) is being addressed.

An example of the kind of confused or mistaken understandings that can arise from a conflicted posturing around feminism occurred in a recent meeting of faculty leaders at my university. When the topic of climate was mentioned in the context of a conversation about diversity, one female colleague actually thought we were talking about the weather and not about workplaces that were hostile to women (or other marginalized groups). To be fair, her confusion might be attributed in part to the way the document in question had been worded. Still, the fact that we were using such indirect descriptions facilitated her confusion. In my view, the tendency to use euphemistic phrases, especially in Christian institutions, to describe or identify the sexist, racist, or homophobic practices that produce these "chilly climates" indicates how far we still have to go towards eradicating such practices. This proclivity to replace or avoid the words "feminist" or "feminism" strongly indicates both our lack of positive and committed engagement with feminism and our lack of understanding about what feminism and Christianity have in common. Whether such posturing arises out of fear, ignorance, stereotypical caricatures, or misinformation, it continues to be endemic to Christian higher education.

Those of us in Christian contexts may assume that students in secular contexts have no problem identifying as feminists, but their identification with feminism has also shown the same distancing tendency as the "I'm not a feminist but…" we encounter in our religious colleges and universities. A *PMLA* special topics discussion on the state of feminism in the October 2006 issue and a speech as recent as Emma Watson's 2014 address to the UN reveal this phenomenon in the past decade. This distancing is certainly part of the larger cultural conversation about post-feminism in general and popular culture especially, but I would argue that the causes for this in secular colleges and universities are significantly different from those in the Christian context. In secular academia, the discussion about feminism over the past three or four decades has been prominent and engaged. Further, it has been an expected part of the terrain

of the secular institution, and students appear to think that many of the aims of feminism have been effectively realized. Indeed, terms like "post-feminist," receive fairly widespread discussion now, especially in popular culture studies.

In Christian higher education, however, the expectation has been the opposite: frequent and direct discussion of feminism has been largely absent. In fact, if we were to use the number of Women's or Gender Studies courses as a measure of how prominent the conversation has been in our institutions, we would have to conclude that it is small indeed. The number of such programs has hovered around the ten percent mark in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU)—only eleven or so member schools of the 120[1] total actually have such programs on their campuses. In my experience and that of many of my colleagues from other CCCU institutions, when students in our schools claim that there is no longer any need for feminism, they are relying mostly on their knowledge of isolated examples of women in the media or on limited representations of a few notable women in their traditions or experience. They are not drawing their conclusions as a result of deep reading, careful analysis, or vigorous and fair-minded debate about feminist or post-feminist theory. In Christian higher education, we seem to proceed as if we all basically agree when it comes to a discourse or ideological position like feminism, and if we don't agree, it's better to be silent than to raise controversy. The tacit understandings we apparently share, however, are not unified. Views range from the position that feminism is incompatible with academic work at a Christian school, to the notion that everyone's already on board with the basic aims of feminism, to the view that there really isn't any need for a "feminist agenda" because women are equal already, to the belief that Christianity makes the need for such an emancipatory project unnecessary because we understand that men and women have different natures and roles in God's design. Clearly, these positions are not in accord with one another, hovering uncertainly and often contradictorily between anti-feminist and post-feminist discourses. We do not actually acknowledge our disagreement about feminism and a feminist praxis until an institutional policy, curricular issue, or a demeaning personal encounter compels us to directly confront our views.

One particular perspective is perhaps the most common among college students in Christian colleges and universities, that view being that feminism and Christianity are antithetical. Melanie Springer Mock, Associate Professor in the Department of Writing and Literature at George Fox University, a member school of the CCCU, commented on this view in her essay "Feminism in Peril: Contending with the *F*-Word" written for

Christian Feminism Today (the Evangelical & Ecumenical Women's Caucus's quarterly periodical) in 2007:

> Feminism has always been an F-word among many of my evangelical students and colleagues [… and] has never appeared to be in much jeopardy. Already having no status among most evangelicals, feminism would be unlikely to appear on a list of endangered ideologies in need of their protection. (Mock 2007, 1)

Faculty members, like Mock, who are among those who directly address feminism in their classes, often receive negative comments in student evaluations regarding the "feminist" quality of their courses; they are labelled as the one or two lone feminists in their departments or colleges and the comments negatively suggest these instructors have an agenda. They are "marked," to use Deborah Tannen's phrase (2006), as aberrant from the mainstream Christian culture.

There may be a growing recognition, at least among some faculty at Christian universities in the CCCU, that views about feminism vary among Christians and that those views are often submerged in broader assumptions about gender equity in their own institution and communities. A recent study conducted by Samuel Joeckel and Thomas Chesnes, *The Christian College Phenomenon* (2012), offers some interesting data tracking some of the differing views. Joeckel and Chesnes' study surveyed faculty and students at CCCU member schools on some broad questions about gender equity, among other matters. Allyson Jule and I analyzed the faculty data coming from that survey and found that the quantitative data in response to the questions on gender equity tended to show general satisfaction that gender equity was present in respondents' schools; however, the qualitative data tended to reveal more dissatisfaction and ambivalence about the progressive state of gender equity with regard to theology and Biblical interpretation, academic freedom, campus or department climates, and personal feeling (Pedersen and Jule 2012). We concluded that one of the reasons for this discrepancy was the dearth of direct conversations (i.e. establishing university policies, designating feminist curriculum, addressing controversial issues in the classroom, creating gender/women's studies programs, etc.) regarding gender and attendant feminist issues (Pedersen and Jule 2012).

In my experience teaching in Christian higher education for the past fourteen years, I have seen a fairly steady stream of incoming students who have little understanding of or affinity with feminism, and a fairly steady stream of graduating students who persist in anti-feminist views through to commencement. While some of our students do become more

accurately informed about feminism as a result of their studies, the persistence of a shallow or inaccurate view of feminism in others may be partially attributed to students’ fear of feminism, which leads them to avoid classes or professors marked as feminist. This fear is to be expected given the caricatures of feminism in the media, especially via radical conservative media icons, and given the silence on gender and sexuality in evangelical churches—unless the topic is chastity.

Our reluctance in Christian higher education to explicitly use these words, to unashamedly make feminist analysis and critique a part of our curriculum and pedagogies, and to do the work of feminist critique in examining our policies and worship practices is a major reason why a shallow and inadequate understanding of feminism persists. It is the space between both tacit views and informed views of feminism as an ideological and political position, on the one hand, and of feminists as actual people—not media stereotypes or caricatures, on the other hand, that I address in this essay. Tacit views are those primarily undergirded by fear, avoidance, and misinformation; whereas, informed views are supported by reading, study, and direct inquiry. It is my contention that we need the terms “feminism” and “feminist,” especially in our context of Christian higher education, for three key reasons: (1) they can elicit conversations about gender and women’s oppression that are missing in the evangelical Christian context; (2) they can introduce a theoretically-informed vocabulary for analyzing the complexity of ideas about, positions on, and commitments to gender—and by extension a lexicon for women’s oppression in the wider world; and (3) they can compel and equip a reasoned response to misconstrued definitions of feminism and caricatures of feminists.

Honest Conversations

In my experience, some of the most honest conversations about feminism and being a feminist have arisen out of my own willingness to call myself a feminist, to publicly name a particular approach I take in a class discussion or lecture as a feminist, and/or to share what being a feminist means to and for me in my own experience as an academic, a professional woman, and a Christian.[2] This self-identification has taken on a number of forms, from the fairly blatant to the more subtle. Examples include:

- posting a quote on my office door board that reads “I’ll be a post-feminist in the post-patriarchy”

- making a statement on the required use of inclusive language part of my syllabus whether or not my university or department adopts such a position
- assigning more women writers than many students are used to reading in a conscious effort to bring balance to the historical literary record and to my students' reading experiences
- raising questions of feminist theoretical analysis in class discussion of texts whether the text is written by a woman or not
- directly exploring the various implications of differing feminist frames of analysis
- owning my feminist critical approach in some of my comments in class discussions
- participating as guest lecturer in other classes and extra-curricular forums dealing with feminism, gender, or sexuality
- discussing with students the gendered issues that arise in our school paper
- mentoring students who come to my office for personal issues surrounding gender, sexuality, feminism, and sometimes possible sexual harassment
- publishing on feminism and Christianity and sharing those works with my students
- answering direct (and sometimes personal) questions about my or my spouse's feminist and Christian commitments.

All of these efforts taken together offer myriad opportunities for conversations with students in which they can openly ask questions, study texts, examine positions, learn history, and read arguments by feminists and about feminism that they would likely never engage in elsewhere. If they did engage in them elsewhere, that immersion might not occur in a context in which their Christian commitments would be taken seriously or be intimately understood. (These are also strategies that anyone can use or modify to better work with her or his own particular teaching style and pedagogical approach.) Some of my students have told me they have engaged feminism because of these very strategies of self-identification, and some of their anecdotes will be the best evidence I can offer here for why I believe it is so important to use these words.

Much of this feedback comes in face-to-face conversations that students have with me after class. One I remember most vividly was with a very bright male student in one of my General Education literature classes. I had designed that course entirely around women novelists, and I had made the argument in my inaugural lecture that women were the individuals most responsible for the development and flourishing of the novel as a literary form. I was also able to pair nineteenth-century women

novelists with twentieth-century women to give added relevance and persistence to the questions that these women writers were raising in their fiction. Of course, the novels lent themselves well to the discussion of many of the standard questions of feminist analysis; thus, we had many opportunities to discuss issues of feminist inquiry in our class sessions. After the conclusion of the final exam, this young man stayed behind to tell me that he had come into the course with some apprehensions about me being a feminist and what that would mean for him, but after taking the course—reading the novels and discussing them with me and the forty or so other students in the class—he had completely reevaluated what he thought a feminist was and what he thought of feminism.

Another young woman, whom I first met in another General Education course and who became a student I mentored during her college years and beyond, emailed me after a talk I gave on campus about feminism and Christianity:

> I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed (and was challenged, encouraged and inspired!) by your talk today. There is no doubt in my mind that your words will be used for God's good purposes […] or, rather, will CONTINUE to be used, since your words have already helped me many times to seek and understand God's purposes in my life. I couldn't help but relate to what you said about living the tension between despair and commitment; and once again, your humility and hope in articulating the convictions of feminist Christianity (or Christian feminism) both teaches and encourages me. I only hope every person in that room today was open enough to hear the wisdom you shared and realize the gift you are to this community. So, for all those reasons, and many more, thank you for sharing your journey.

Another young woman who has maintained contact with me after her graduation and into the first years of her marriage recently wrote to tell me that having grown up in a family where her mother held a steady job and her church youth pastor was a woman, she "didn't see how feminism was still important." She went on to say, "Yet, when I attended college, I became acquainted with women's stories that differed from my own, and I saw how sensitive gender issues really are." She related how she and her husband were now "caught by the fact" that their new church taught it was "in accordance with God's created order" that women not preach or become elders, and the two of them were shocked to discover that "gender roles was a new topic to some of [their small] group members." She related her discouragement over Douglas Wilson's book, *Reforming Marriage*, chosen by their small group for study and the way she combated that discouragement:

> While this book spurred on great discussion, I felt stifled by its teaching that women are purely their husbands' helpers […] I was grateful for feminism to remind me that I am an individual who is free to define being a wife for herself. I was reminded that I too am called by God, not just my husband. I cringe to think of how many women have a gift for preaching and are not encouraged to use it because of their gender. Because of this, I see a need for feminism for young Christian women—it encourages them to challenge their beliefs about themselves, about others, and about God. And learning these things at a young age hopefully allows them to formulate their thoughts on these issues before making life-changing decisions."

Her comments illustrate some of the ways in which women are held back from more egalitarian understandings of marriage and from using their gifts and skills within some Christian communities. This young woman was not hostile towards marriage and family, nor was she hostile to education. Indeed her college education had equipped her with knowledge and skills that she had worked hard to develop and was prepared to use in the workaday world. Her comments arose from *within* the context of her marriage as it was being defined by the particular Christian community she had joined during the early years of her married life. What she sought was an understanding of marriage, within her Christian community, that would allow for mutuality and for the full use of both partners' unique skills and preparation for service in the church and in the everyday world.

Comments such as hers offer some of the best critique of current American criticisms of feminism as too radical and ineffective because of an alleged hostility toward marriage and family. These kinds of critiques often find play in more popular than scholarly venues. Christine Hoff Sommers' 2008 article "Feminism and Freedom" in *The American Spectator* is one such critique. Sommers draws a distinction between what she calls "conservative feminism" which is not hostile to marriage or family and "egalitarian feminism" which is. She contends that "conservative feminism" has been the more successful means of women's widening enfranchisement historically and is the position offering the most promise for women today (Sommers 2008). Sommers comes at her critique of feminism largely from the position of a conservative secular scholar and expresses scant understanding of the confining terrains women currently experience in some Christian communities. Her distinction between conservative and egalitarian feminism is well-known among Christian feminist scholars who routinely address the "complementarian" and "egalitarian" views of women and men in light of Biblical scripture and gender roles in the church and in family and relational life. Indeed two well-established organizations, Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) and

Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus-Christian Feminism Today (EEWC-CFT), have been very active for decades in holding national and international conferences and supporting published work on these views of gender.[3]

Complementarians proceed from the essentialist point of view that there are God-ordained differences in the natures of women and men, and these gender differences complement one another. Complementarians work to reify these essential or so-called natural distinctions. Their project seeks to extend the complementarian view to its logical expression, limiting women to roles and positions more in keeping with worn platitudes that women are more nurturing and helping and men are more adventuresome and conquering—the very limitation that my former student was chafing against in her church community as a newly married woman. Sommers uses "modern social science—and evidence of everyday life [noting that w]omen are numerically dominant in the helping professions; [and] men prevail in the saving and rescuing vocations such as policemen, firefighters, and soldiers" (2008, 61) to support her argument that conservative feminism is the better or more effective form of feminism, but her argument falls flat in addressing the very real limitations and erasures that many women in church communities face in the name of such a conservative or complementarian view of gender. Further, Sommers' criticism in "Feminism and Freedom" rings hollow when she extolls 1940s Clare Booth Luce, whom Sommers labels as a conservative feminist for her "exemplary remarks on Mother Nature and sex difference [that] are especially relevant today" (Sommers 2008). Sommers is relying on Luce to make the point that nature is clear on sex difference and the attendant pursuits that should follow from nature's dictates:

> It is time to leave the question of the role of women in society up to Mother Nature—a difficult lady to fool. You have only to give women the same opportunities as men, and you will soon find out what is or is not in their nature. What is in women's nature to do they will do, and you won't be able to stop them. But you will also find, and so will they, that what is not in their nature, even if they are given every opportunity, they will not do, and you won't be able to make them do it. (Sommers 2008)

The argument both Sommers and Luce invoke here with regard to nature is essentialist but more in the service of explaining why women want to be conservative (or in the Christian context, complementarian) feminists as opposed to egalitarian feminists.

What is interesting about Sommers' approach here is not its novelty but rather its failure to understand or clearly represent the philosophical

grounding of her argument in essentialism and its contrast to a statement made by John Stuart Mill in 1869. Mill outlines the same terrain delimiting nature and women's behaviour, but to very different ends. His view is simply that nurture, environment, or social construction has been an insidious and potent shaper of anything we might venture to call "nature." While Mill's statement is strikingly similar to Luce's, Mill is trying to advance the idea that we should take care, philosophically speaking, when grounding arguments in an appeal to "nature" since it is virtually impossible to say what nature is in any soundly purist sense:

> Neither does it avail anything to say that the *nature* of the two sexes adapts them to their present functions and position, and renders these appropriate to them. Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that any one knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. If men had ever been found in society without women, or women without men, or if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of the men, something might have been positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. (Mill 2006)

Further, Mill uses the so-called logic of nature in an inverse way to Luce and to Sommers when he writes in *Subjection*,

> one thing we may be certain of—that what is contrary to women's nature to do, they never will be made to do by simple giving their nature free play. The anxiety of mankind [and in the case of Sommers and Luce we must add "womankind"] to interfere in behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing (2006).

Though Mill's writing is nearly 150 years removed from our own time, it is appropriate to cite him in view of Sommers' claim that modern feminism has erased history. On the contrary, the contentions at the heart of modern debates about feminism—conservative or egalitarian—arise from a very old historical terrain indeed, and one that acknowledged the philosophical validity of constructivist positions long before Luce or Sommers sought to discount them.

One of the longest and most self-reflective email letters I have ever received came from an upper division male student who was responding to

some of my work that eventually went into Jule's and my 2006 book, *Being Feminist, Being Christian*. He talked about the "fear" he had in using the term "feminist" and "feminism" as stemming mostly from his "lack of education about feminism" which he said "perpetuated two things: my ignorance about it and my fear of being involved in conflicts consisting of over-zealous talk, which might unduly distance me from my peers." He went on to say that "I was also preventing myself from acquiring the proper tools or framework necessary to articulate any stance." Perhaps the most significant thing he related was this: "What troubles me now is that I have missed the chance in class at [university] to discuss it openly and knowledgably."

These anecdotes illustrate that for some of our students our self-identification as feminists is crucial to creating honest conversation. It is vital for provoking deep spiritual and intellectual journeying and for facilitating careful, thoughtful reflection—at least when it comes to topics or issues or positions that would be identified as feminist. Along with our self-identification, our classroom spaces are ideal for making our feminist commitments plain, for living them out honestly, passionately, and humbly in front of students as we model interwoven academic and spiritual lives. They are optimal for affording our students an opportunity they may never get anywhere else to examine their understandings and images of feminism and feminists.

Informed Vocabulary

The second reason I believe we need the terms "feminist" and "feminism" is for their connection to the rich history of and discourse on feminism. This connection can help us to understand the feminist work that predates ours; to articulate our own ideas, positions, and commitments regarding gender; to recognize the global world of women's ongoing oppression; and to better understand the complexity of these domains in differing past, present, and future contexts. The role of historical developments and nuanced discourse in understanding and even defining feminism is illustrated in *PMLA's* forum on the state of feminism published in their October 2006 issue. The forum aimed to identify the success of feminism, the challenges that its success has now engendered, the varied reasons why feminism still has much to offer those of us working in higher education, and the directions for productive future feminist work in academia and beyond. Susan Gubar, distinguished professor of English at Indiana University, Bloomington and best known for her joint work with Sandra Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, noted:

> Feminist criticism, it can be argued, has been phenomenally successful within the humanities in general and literature departments in particular. Through its astonishingly rapid evolution during the last three decades of the twentieth century, feminist criticism moved from a critique of male-dominated societal structures and disciplines to the recovery of female authors, from a reassessment of how we can conceptualize the cultural past in newly defined historical periods to an appreciation of the effect of gender on elite and popular genres. (Gubar 2006, 1712)

Gubar's description identifies patriarchy in her "critique of male-dominated societal structures." She identifies recovery of or archival work on female authors, which includes: (1) the study of women's literary history like that reflected upon by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, (2) the reconfiguration of standard literature anthologies, such as the *Norton*, to include a more accurate and representative sampling of women writers, (3) the publishing of new anthologies exclusively devoted to women writers to set alongside standard anthologies of a given literary period that would include only the writing of male writers, (4) the scholarship devoted to tracking and analyzing the erasure of prolific and esteemed women writers from anthologies of literature and from literary history itself, and (5) the reevaluation of genres deserving serious treatment and literary analysis, such as settlement literature, travel writing, journal writing, periodical prose, naturalist notebooks, children's literature, devotional writing, and letter writing. Gubar identifies in her "effect of gender on elite and popular genres" the combination of feminist analysis with cultural studies in critiquing texts more broadly defined than literary prose, drama, or poetry, such as advertising, music lyrics and videos, television shows, films, journalism in all its venues, and the mass media.

Sharon Marcus, another contributor to the *PMLA* forum, notes that "Feminist criticism has been successful enough to make its goals familiar ones that can be quickly summarized" though I would argue, not by many evangelical Christians inside or outside Christian higher education. The goals of feminist criticism summarized by Marcus are these:

> (1) Feminist criticism negates the status quo by questioning misogyny and other invidious gender distinctions and by analyzing constructions of femininity and masculinity.
> (2) Feminist criticism constructs definitions of gender that do not depend on female inferiority or male supremacy, expanding our sense of what women and men are, have been, and might become and asking what it might mean to be free of gender altogether.

> (3) Feminist criticism attends to differences among women, often by being self-critical, and thus extends its purview not only to gender in general but to all inequalities that affect women or intersect with gender. (Marcus 2006, 1722)

Marcus's summary of feminism's goals reminds of us of several key terms: misogyny; gender and gender distinctions; constructions of femininity and masculinity (which connect directly with theorizing about essentialist or constructivist paradigms); male supremacy (a term which has been powerfully used by womanists of colour to critique the racism embedded in white, middle-class, Western feminism); male-identified and female-identified women; androgyny; gender performance theory; and difference as a theoretical concept that subverts and undoes notions of universal woman/hood. For Christian women, Marcus's ponderings on gender bring St. Paul's words to the Galatians to mind: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer enslaved or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).[4] Astrid Henry (2006) reflects on feminist criticism's ability to be self-critical, to turn its analytical lens on itself:

> The debates of the 1980s about difference in feminism also affected feminist literary theory, so that, as a result, it has become axiomatic today to point out that there is no one woman who can speak for all women, no category "Women" in which we can all gather as feminist, and no singular experience of gender, now or in the past. (1718)

These observations about feminist criticism's success are not written with a general vocabulary but rather with the rich disciplinary knowledge and vocabulary that takes as understood all of the unspoken associations that I have delineated. It is this vocabulary and these associations that students do not know or understand as being connected to feminism. Very few of them will have been exposed to the depth of feminist thinking if all they have had to rely on is the mass media and their local churches.

Their familiar phrase, "I'm not a feminist, but…" reveals their lack of knowledge about what feminism actually is. Many university students resist self-identifying as feminists on the one hand while fully supporting most of the basic tenets of (second and earlier wave) feminism on the other. "If asked directly," observes Marcus of her secular university students, "most students would say that they are not feminist, yet most also respond in the affirmative if asked whether they hold positions associated with liberal feminism, such as women's right to equal pay for equal work" (2006, 1723). In an email conversation, I asked one of our

student reporters why it was important to her to announce at the beginning of her article that she wasn't a feminist. She answered, "Actually, I guess I could consider myself a feminist—but I don't like to label myself because I always feel like I have to fit into that description later." It was not at all clear to me what her label or description of feminism contained, nor was I certain that she knew herself. Students' ignorance is a burden we academics must bear and address. We must show our students just how much feminist ground they are standing on as they live out their modern lives, how the legacy they have been given has come from the personal commitments and sacrifices of others, and how much more work there remains to be done for women worldwide.[5] In short, there is a commitment required of this young woman journalist if she is to be a responsible citizen in the world, and we, her teachers, have a responsibility to help her see what that commitment may be or mean. As feminist academic Toril Moi observes, "if we—academic feminists—do not take up the challenge, can we be sure that others will?" (2006, 1739). To be sure, if we do not take up this challenge, ignorance will persist. More worrisome still, especially in the context of Christian higher education, is that some will take up the challenge of identifying and defining feminism and feminists with misinformation and caricature to extremely damaging ends.

Perhaps even more important than students' ignorance is the fear embedded in their resistance to identifying as feminists. This fear is connected to the damaging stereotypes and fearmongering that persist in many US cultural representations of feminists. Moi's observations about her secular students at Duke illustrate this resistance and fear:

> Since the mid-1990s, I have noticed that most of my students no longer make feminism their central political personal project. At Duke I occasionally teach an undergraduate seminar called Feminist Classics. In the first session, I ask the students whether they consider themselves to be feminists. The answer is usually no. When I ask them if they are in favor of freedom, equality, and justice for women, the answer is always yes. "Doesn't this mean that you are feminist after all?" I ask. The answer is usually, "Oh, well, if *that's* all you mean by feminism, then we are feminists. But we would never *call* ourselves feminists." When I ask why they wouldn't, a long, involved discussion slowly reveals that on my liberal, privileged American campus, young women who would never put up with legal or institutional injustice believe that if they were to call themselves feminists, other people would think that they must be strident, domineering aggressive, and intolerant and—worst of all—that they must hate men. (Moi 2006, 1736)