**Secularism Within Feminism: A Historical Perspective**

Throughout American history, the women’s rights movement in all its incarnations has been viewed as a threat to religious orthodoxy.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even deeply religious feminists such as Lecretia Mott found themselves battling clerical authorities who pointed to Paul’s declaration that women should be subservient to their husbands.[[2]](#footnote-2) The infamous exclusion of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Motts, and Ann Phillips from the 1840 anti-slavery conference in London was justified on the grounds of not antagonizing religious individuals from the abolitionist movement.[[3]](#footnote-3) Such fears resurface in the Seneca Falls *Declaration of Sentiments* which, while attacking the patriarchal practices of the churches, contained references to a “great Creator” so as to avoid charges of infidelity.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Unsurprisingly, many freethinkers resided within the ranks of the early feminist movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was noted for her attacks on religion for its role in furthering the oppression of women. Beginning in 1895, she began publishing *The Woman’s Bible*, an exhaustive work of biblical scholarship that excoriated the sexist nature of Christian scripture. These activities brought her into conflict with Susan B. Anthony, who, while sharing Stanton’s basic convictions about religion and sexism, believed that stating such views too publicly would harm the cause of women’s suffrage by alienating Christian suffragists. As alliances between the secular and Christian wings of the suffragist movement were cemented, the aging Stanton was gradually marginalized within the women’s rights movement, betrayed by the movement she had been instrumental in founding. In the years following her death, ceremonies commemorating the Seneca Falls conference would pay extensive homage to Anthony while making virtually no mention of Stanton, a condition that would continue into the 1980s.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Another early feminist who was not afraid of directly critiquing religion was Ernestine L. Rose, a Polish immigrant of Jewish ethnicity. As an atheist, Jew, and suffragist, she was the target of vitriolic slanders from religious leaders, who frequently accused her of promiscuity and free love. Refusing to be intimidated, she became a well-known and eloquent advocate of women’s rights, abolition, freedmen’s rights, yet in subsequent histories of the 19th century women’s movement, she became a neglected figure, despite being a colleague and close friend to Elizabeth Cady Stanton. 19th century Jews were generally reluctant to participate in progressive movements such as abolitionism for fear of jeopardizing their position in an unusually tolerant nation. Given these fears, 19th century Judaism did not see Rose as “a credit to the Hebrew race”, and so made little note of her in the archives of Jewish libraries. 19th century feminism was similarly desirous not to be associated with the atheist Rose, and so it too erased her from the collective memory. Rose’s admirers expressed shock when the 1870 edition of *Eminent Women of the Age* omitted her completely. Like many great freethinkers in history, she was posthumously marginalized in the very movement to which she had dedicated her life.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The same fear of being associated with atheism resurfaces as an element in the second wave feminism of the 1960s, particularly since feminism, in its insistence on women being granted equal status with men in all element of life, runs contrary to centuries of religious dogma and marks feminism as a fundamentally secularist movement. This secularism is reflected in the fact that that many of the second wave feminists, such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, were secular Jews who identified more with Jewish social activism than with the Jewish religion itself. Nonetheless, second wave feminists tended to downplay this Jewish character of the movement, as being Jewish was frequently associated with atheism in the minds of evangelical leaders, and stigmatized as such.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Nevertheless, full enmity between feminism and the religious right did not emerge until the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized first trimester abortion in 1973. Feminism in the late 60’s and early 70’s had invested significant efforts in the campaign for abortion rights, embarking on public education and legislative reform efforts nationwide. In this venture they were greatly successful, as witnessed by the fact that Gallup found support for liberalized abortion laws rose from 15% of Americans in 1968 to 64% in 1972. In doing so, it was chipping away at broader issues of the cloak of shame and sin that religions so often try to associate with sex, and openly stating that questions of right and wrong belonged to the individual conscience, not hoary dogmas. With the 1973 verdict, the battle with evangelical Christianity was irrevocably joined. The conflict has been a defining feature of American politics ever since, as evidenced by the current Mississippi effort to amend the state constitution to grant personhood to any fertilized egg.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Tensions concerning any public association of feminism with atheism continue to this day, as testified to by Bronwyn Winter in a 2001 letter to the *Journal of Women’s History*:

“There is considerable resistance within women’s studies circles and some, although not all, wider feminist circles to any advocacy of atheism as a feminist stance. I note in passing that this is odd, given feminism’s historical links with sections of the Marxist Left, even if many feminists have dissociated themselves with this Left … or indeed were never part of it. While I acknowledge that it is not always easy, possible, or even desirable for feminists, particularly in a situation of resistance to colonialism or neocolonialism, to wholly and publicly distance themselves from a religion that is also often politicized as the emblem of cultural autonomy, it does not follow that adherence to religion is in itself a radically progressive stance.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Women Within Freethought: A Historical Perspective**

Freethought, a movement dedicated to an analysis of the world with a mind unburdened by religious dogmas, has long been associated with progressive social causes. The antebellum freethought movement, which flourished from 1825 to 1850, boasted leaders such as Frances Wright (1795-1852) and Robert Dale Owen (1801-1877) was wrote and lectured on topics such as abolition, socialism, and gender-equality.[[10]](#footnote-10) The postbellum freethought movement worked tirelessly in opposing the proposed Christian Amendment (which would have made Christianity America’s official religion), school prayer, and laws enforcing Sabbath observation, among other intrusions of the church into state affairs.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In analyzing questions of gender and religion, postbellum freethinkers generally agreed that women were more religious than men, and many concluded from this that women were less rational than men.[[12]](#footnote-12) The major debate was whether this was due to inherent biological qualities, or centuries of social conditioning, with later position having largely won by the end of the century. This historical constructionist argument was forcefully presented by such feminist freethinkers as Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Susan Wixon. These women wrote extensively on the misogynous character of the Bible, arguing that Biblical teachings were a significant obstacle to women’s advancement. To the constructionists, women were capable of becoming fully rational and rejecting religion. From these arguments arose an agreement that masculinity and feminity were socially constructed, a notion that would later be echoed by the feminist movement itself.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Such ponderings were to find practical application in the debates over women’s suffrage that raged throughout late 19th century freethought publications. Although a majority (60%) of postbellum freethinkers favored women’s suffrage, a vocal minority of freethinkers presented arguments in opposition. The observed preponderance of women within religious congregations led to fears that women’s suffrage would threaten the secular character of American government.[[14]](#footnote-14) To understand the degree of terror this created, one must appreciate the horrendous discrimination freethinkers faced in 19th century America. The 1837 Comstock Act, which banned “obscene” materials, was frequently used to harass and arrest freethinkers, and that was passed without women’s suffrage.[[15]](#footnote-15) If women’s suffrage were passed, some freethinkers did not find it inconceivable that the newly elected officials may initiate violence against them. Even some freethinking women, fearing the persecution they risked with a more pious electorate, spoke out against women’s suffrage. Though in principle most freethinkers believed women could exercise a rational capacity and renounce religion, until they had done so it was viewed as dangerous to grant them further political rights.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Pro-suffrage freethinkers countered that women’s suffrage was fully rational and desirable, and that denying women the vote while taxes on them was fundamentally unjust. Additionally, they hoped that extending the suffrage to women would be instrumental in liberating them from religion. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a staunch advocate of this, arguing that the right to political participation would at least partly displace concern with religion. Others went further, arguing that voting rights and political participation would lead more women into freethought circles. Even so, pro-suffrage freethinkers conceded that the immediate result of women’s suffrage would likely be deleterious for secularism before any exodus of women from the church. It is to credit of such freethinkers that they were willing to risk immediate political inexpediency for the sake of gender justice.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Those post-bellum freethinkers who believed women’s suffrage would contribute to the liberation of women from religion would likely have been gratified to learn of the example of Madalyn Murray O’Hair, the 20th century atheist best known as the plaintiff in the 1963 Supreme Court decision *Murray v. Curlett*, which prohibited Bible reading and school prayer in public schools. Murray went on to act as an important leader of the American freethought movement, founding what became American Atheists on July 1, 1963.[[18]](#footnote-18) In addition to her brilliantly militant atheism, she was a self-describe “militant feminist”, believing that women should be fully equal with men.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Feminist Arguments for Atheism**

From its earliest days, feminism has been critical of the patriarchal natures of the vast majority of religions. In 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Women’s Bible* which famously eviscerated the Bible for its role in contributing to the exploitation of women. Modern feminists too have frequently attacked the implicit and explicit sexism present with the field of religious studies. Religious texts and values have tended to reflect male interests ahead of female ones. This is particularly true of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which posits a single god of masculine gender. Many feminists have responded to this by trying to reform religion, but others have questioned why religion should be retained at all.[[20]](#footnote-20)

One of the major arguments for atheism is the Argument of Evil, which, simply put, asks how evil can exist in a world supposedly presided over by an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god:

“Where was God? Where was the intelligent designer of the universe when 1.5 million children were turned into smoke by zealous Nazis? Where was the all powerful, all knowing, wholly good being whose very essence is radically opposed to evil, whi;e millions of children were starved to death by Stalin, had their limbs chopped off with machetes in Rwanda, were turned inot amputees by the diamond trade in Sierra Leone, and worked to death, even now by the child slave trade that, by conservative estimates, enslaves 250 million children worldwide? Without deivine justice, all of this suffering is gratuitous. How, then, can a wholly good, all-powerful God be believed to exist?”[[21]](#footnote-21)

As Christine Overall notes in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*,[[22]](#footnote-22) strong arguments for atheism can be made from a feminist standpoint. Chief among these is a feminist version of the Argument from Evil: the religions of the Abrahamic tradition have a long legacy of harm to women (the Argument from Evil becomes particularly damning when religion itself is the source of evil). In the Talmudic Age of Judaism, if a man on his wedding night found that his wife was not a virgin, then he was to have her stoned to death.[[23]](#footnote-23) From the 18th century onwards the Catholic Church maintained Magdalene laundries in which “fallen” women were incarcerated for life and exploited as slave labor (the last such facility only closed in 1996).[[24]](#footnote-24) The Bible itself is rife with passages promoting a view of women as less than human. For instance, Deuteronomy requires that if a virgin is raped, she must marry her rapist.[[25]](#footnote-25) Paul stated that women should remain silent in the church and subservient to their husbands.[[26]](#footnote-26) All in all, the Bible is a thoroughly revolting document when read in full.

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5. Jacoby, S. (2004). pp. 194-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. Jacoby, S. (2004). p. 338-340. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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13. Kirkly, E.A. (2000). pp. 30-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kirkly, E.A. (2000). pp. 121-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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25. Deuteronomy 22: 28-29. King James Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35. King James Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)