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Feminism and the Third Wave: Politicising the Sociology of Religion?

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to outline how and why third wave feminism emerged, some meanings that can be attached to the third wave, and the journey it has travelled. The confusing terminology surrounding contemporary feminism will be discussed, and the third wave as a whole will be linked to the sociology of religion and a research project currently being conducted concerning priests in the Church of England. The third wave has often failed to politicize religion and other societal institutions and it is argued that this issue needs to be addressed in order for third wave thinking to become fully operational. This will be placed in the context of wider debates about the ways in which the sociology of religion has often failed to engage with feminism, and conversely, how secular feminists have resisted putting religion on their agenda.

Key Words: third wave feminism / religion / postfeminism



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Introduction

The so-called third wave of feminism has received much attention in recent years. It is widely believed to have originated with the publication of two books in the mid-1990s by Findlen (1995) and Walker (1995). In fact, the seeds for the third wave were set much earlier, in the black feminism of the 1980s, where there was a need to establish a conceptually different feminism that critiqued the racism of the second wave (Springer, 2002; Mann and Huffman, 2005). The anthologies edited by Findlen (1995) and Walker (1995) had a similar purpose – to critique and build on the second wave in order to create a new sort of feminism. Both books are organized around the personal testimonies of young women who epitomize the third wave – young women who have grown up, as Baumgardner and Richards argue, where ‘feminism is like fluoride... it’s simply in the water’ (2000, p.17). In addition, authors such as Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) highlight how young women of the third wave are positioned in an environment of postmodernism, heightened technology and globalisation. This cultural atmosphere is very different to that experienced by second wave feminists. The third wave has also emerged when central tenets of second wave thinking, such as reproductive rights, have come under attack. This backlash against feminism, propelled forward by some government ideologies and some sectors of the media (Pozner, 2003) has spurred young feminists on in cataloguing the injustice of this. Therefore, the third wave has emerged under a unique set of cultural juxtapositions – on the one hand, feminism has infused the lives of young women, in terms of equal opportunities policies in schools and the workplace, yet on the other hand, feminists’ hard won rights are under threat, with some on the political right proclaiming that women have gone too far. This is an unusual set of circumstances that is somewhat different from the era of the second wave.

There have been a number of interpretations of this cultural environment. Postfeminists have focused on the former contentions, articulating that feminist goals have been achieved, and now is the time to put this into practice and enact the rights that have been won. Third wavers however, as Kinser (2004) asserts, are concerned to oppose themselves to this stream of thinking, arguing that there is still a lot of work to be done, especially in light of the threats posed by a backlash.

Conceptual Difficulties

The terminology surrounding contemporary feminism is complex, with no unified meanings over ‘third wave, ‘postfeminism’ and so on. Often, third wave feminism and postfeminism are conflated, and it is implied they are the same thing (Gillis and Munford, 2004a). Oakley and Mitchell (1997, p.xxiv) define postfeminism as ‘implying both that feminism is a passé label, and that everything women could reasonably want has already been accomplished’. But some articulate that postfeminism isn’t about the end or death of feminism (Budgeon, 2001) but, rather, it has been hijacked by the popular feminism of the media. Therefore, postfeminism has a double meaning – relating on a populist level to the media reaction to feminism as ‘past it’ and on another level, in the academy, postfeminism means something more akin to a new generational way of doing and understanding feminism (Mann and Huffman, 2005; Springer, 2002).

However, postfeminism has been heavily critiqued for being too individualistic, too populist and too uncritical of gendered norms (Heywood and Drake, 2004). Postfeminism also does itself a disservice, if, in fact, it is concerned with feminist goals. Having the prefix ‘post’, meaning after, is literally saying that this set of ideas is concerned with what happens after feminism – so is therefore linguistically arguing that feminism is dead. If postfeminism is about active feminism, then its advocates have chosen a wholly inappropriate label.

I would argue, against some in the academy, that postfeminism does relate to these media misrepresentations, encapsulating the work of individuals like Roiphe (1994) and Paglia (1990) and I think it is too late for academic feminists to reclaim the postfeminist label for it to refer to something outside of this definition – it has already been saturated with the ideas and beliefs of these conservative feminists. And I think it is important to distinguish such writers from the third wave tradition. Third wave feminism as a concept, unlike the linguistic problems surrounding the term ‘postfeminism’, gives reference to and links itself to previous historical feminist waves, and can be seen as a continuation of earlier work. Despite the so-called generational wars between second and third wavers, the term ‘third wave’ gives a sense of building on and extrapolating from earlier waves. (Although this is not to endorse the idea of wave terminology at the expense of not recognising the criticisms of this analogy, such as the

way in which it implies only one wave can exist at once (Garrison, 2005) or the fact that it doesn't always capture feminist activity – as Altman (2003) asserts, where does Simone de Beauvoir fit in? As wave 1.8?)

The main point to take so far is that third wave feminists actively disassociate themselves from the label of postfeminism, for some of the reasons above, and they actively work against the backlash engulfing society in its many forms. So what does the third wave offer, and are there any problems with this new approach?

The Personal to the Political

In its early manifestations, third wave feminism was based on personal testimonies and anecdotes, as represented in both Walker's (1995) and Findlen's (1995) texts. These accounts link third wave feminism very much with popular culture – for example, some of the key writers on the third wave (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000) are journalists, and many of the zines and on-line feminist communities have emerged from popular consciousness rather than the academy. However, in recent years – specifically since the millennium, a number of feminists have attempted to ground the third wave within the academy in order to bring the theory back in. This has been epitomized by Gillis, Howie and Munford (2004b) in Britain and Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) in the USA. A clear aim of Dicker and Piepmeier for instance, is to call

for a third wave of feminism that is politically conscious, grounded in the realities of life in the twenty-first century, and willing to engage in collective action in order to address injustice (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003, p.10).

Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) are critical of some elements of Findlen (2005) and Walker's (2005) work for failing to link individual stories to the larger political whole. Personal testimony can only take us so far. These stories need to be brought together and theoretically placed – linking the personal back with the political (although the political shouldn't be collapsed back into the personal – see Gillis and Munford, 2004a) otherwise the testimonies become stand-alone accounts which leave societal structures intact and unchanged. Gillis and Munford (2004a) see part of the problem having to do with the whole wave analogy. Each wave is pitted against the last so that a collective feminist identity cannot emerge, based on a shared history (although

as I've already argued, terminologically, there is the potential for this). But such inner wars between and within waves only give power to backlash politics and takes attention away from the real inequality women today are facing.

The third wave needs to expand its concerns to incorporate not just popular culture, but to consider institutional bodies such as workplaces, the government, religious organisations and so on. Within my own field, not enough account has been taken of the institutionalized nature of gender inequality in faith communities. Although the impact of Roseanne Barr, the sexism of hip hop music and the politics of feminist aerobics instructors are all important in their own right, I think more attention needs to be placed on key structures in society (e.g. the education system, politics, religion) to see how the personal stories and narratives link up to the larger picture. Such issues need to be politicized. For instance, a key question one could ask is how can the sexist lyrics of hip hop be framed and interpreted in the music industry as a whole?

One problem with reinvigorating theory and linking agency to structure is that this can be perceived as a very academic activity, and the power to define and enact the politics of the third wave may be wrestled away from those outside the academy. Gillis, Howie and Munford (2004b) argue that the tensions over ownership of the third wave have already begun. I do believe that the attempts by Gillis, Howie and Munford (2004b) and Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) to bring the theory back in is extremely important – especially for third wave theory to impact and inform future feminist research. But at the same time, it is important not to exclude those outside of the academy as it is here where injustice and prejudice is experienced. As Baumgardner and Richards assert 'testimony is where feminism starts' (Gillis and Munford, 2004a p.175, quoting Baumgardner and Richards 2000, p.20).

Feminism and Religion

Consideration will now be given to feminism and religion to give some insight into my own research and how I am applying third wave theory in my work. My topic area is focused on women priests in the Church of England. In 1992 the Anglican Church passed legislation which allowed for the first time the ordination of women to the priesthood. Over the last fifteen years a lot of research has been conducted into the integration of women priests. However, where the research is minimal is when looking at the family of the priest. Little research has looked how

women priests manage family life and church life. So I am principally concerned with definitions surrounding motherhood and priesthood, and how these identities are managed. I am also looking at the partners of priests to see whether their masculine identity impacts on the role they play within the church. Clergy husbands are a new historical emergence. Traditionally, the sociological literature has consistently shown how clergy *wives* have been incorporated into the church as an unpaid curate, with certain expectations made of them. Finch (1983) argued that the wives of clergy were often under immense pressure to become part of a defined role, which encompassed numerous tasks that were perceived to be in-keeping with the skills and competencies of women. This included church coffee mornings, running the Mother's Union and being a general secretary to her husband's work. But does the construction of masculinity enable clergy husbands to have more freedom in choosing the activities they undertake in church? Are they subject to the same role constraints as clergy wives? If not, how far is this due to the way dominant masculinities and femininities are constructed?

This topic is being investigated through interviews with women clergy and their partners. A small number of interviews with clergy wives will also be conducted, to see whether they still have the expectations and demands placed on them as found in classic studies such as Finch's (1983).

This research is hinged on an understanding of gender identity that resonates strongly with Connell's (2002) ideas on the existence of numerous masculinities and femininities. This implies that gender identity is fluid and capable of change, and is not based on some essentialised biology. I am also looking at this through the lens of embodiment theory. This largely refers to overcoming Cartesian dualisms between the mind and body to understand their connectedness. Often, sociologists have treated the body as something that is for biologists to deal with. However, embodiment is about sociologists re-engaging with the body and seeing how the body is socially placed. Second-wave feminism made a famous distinction between sex and gender – sex was the supposed biological aspects of the sexed body and gender was the ways in which the body was socially constructed as either male or female. But this was tantamount to leaving sex to the biologists whilst sociologists dealt with the social. For some third wave feminists, this is no longer tenable (Arneil, 1999, Mack-Canty, 2004). In order to have a fully working and appropriate theory of sex/gender, we need to see how the biological is socially situated.

In the wider context, the study of religion has crossed many disciplines, being a concern of theology, religious studies, sociology, psychology and many others. The feminist influence in these disciplines with specific regard to the topic area of religion has varied. For instance, in Christian theology since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been an explosion of feminist critique and insight, spearheaded by well-known feminist theologians such as Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly. However, in sociology, my home discipline, a different pattern has emerged.

Sociology as an academic subject has always been concerned with religion. All of the so-called founding fathers of sociology (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) had religion on their agendas, especially regarding how modernity was shaping religious outlook. This interest in religion continued within sociology throughout the twentieth century. However, the sociology of religion has remained a male-dominated enterprise and women and *their* experiences have been systematically ignored. Walter and Davie (1998) catalogue the way that even now, the issue of gender isn't incorporated into the body of mainstream texts and Warne (1998) sees evidence of tokenism in such books where women are just added on as an afterthought. As Warne argues,

You cannot just “add women and stir”. That is, scholars of religion cannot simply... devote a special page, or section or chapter to “Women” and expect to have addressed the problem of exclusion of women from prior scholarship (Warne, 1998, p.431).

So mainstream writers on the sociology of religion have failed to incorporate gendered accounts into the very theories underpinning research. So what have feminists done about it? Well, actually, very little. There has been minimal effort on the part of secular feminists to include religion on *their* agenda. So why have feminists tended to sideline religion in their debates? Walter and Davie (1998) argue that because religious communities are perceived to be male-dominated spaces, researchers are reluctant to study women who appear to be aligning themselves to patriarchy and finding fulfilment. However, as they go on to point out, this has not precluded research on the nuclear family – another institution which can be deemed patriarchal but which many women choose to belong to. So this really is no excuse for not studying women in religion.

Another reason that can be considered is the secularisation debate. There is not the space to fully discuss the various meanings that one can ascribe to secularisation, but suffice to say

that it generally concerns debates surrounding whether religion is declining in some way. If religion is supposedly declining in importance, then there can be seen as being little point investigating it, and no point in charting the position of women within it. The secularisation thesis can be critiqued, however. Indeed, Robbins and Robertson (1991) predicted that religion would become something of a hot topic. Therefore, the so-called decline in religion doesn't necessarily imply that feminism should not engage in the debate.

So where has the impetus come for the study of women in religion, if traditionally, feminists have tended to leave the subject alone? The answer appears to lie within the religious community itself. In the Christian tradition, women actively engaged in religious life have attempted to document their situation vis-à-vis men and have begun to critique the position of women in religious traditions. As James (1976) indicates, this questioning and critiquing has been a large part of the Protestant tradition. Protestantism has always engendered a feminist activism, largely because of its wider political commitments. As James (1976) articulates, Protestantism stood against orthodoxy and authority and radicalized religious belief. This cultural environment created fertile ground for women to begin to 'protest' against their own subjugation. In some cases, it even prompted women to begin their own religious movements, such as Ann Lee, who started the Shakers and Mary Baker Eddy who founded Christian Science. These women and others like them were taking on prominent and charismatic roles, and they openly challenged religious authority. This predated the women's movement as we perceive it today.

In recent years, dialogue has opened between feminism and the study of religion. In fact, an anthology by Juschka (2001) creates a space where feminists, theologians and sociologists all meet. As Warne (2002, p.151) puts in, in her review of the book, 'boundaries are crossed: feminist theologians stand side by side with scholars whose engagement with religion is non-existent'. Therefore, a new, integrated approach to the study of religion is being advocated. This is nothing new. Religion has always been a multi-disciplinary subject, with influences from anthropology, theology and sociology. This interdisciplinary approach is also championed by Wallace (1991), who argues that gender and religion have for too long been treated as a sub-section of the discipline rather than being integral to the debates.

So how does third wave feminism fit in? Well, unsurprisingly, very few scholars have linked together religion with the third wave in the Christian context. (Linda Woodhead (2001)

being an exception). Therefore, I am theorising from a place where few of my contemporaries or predecessors have. This is exciting yet unnerving, but I suppose the most taxing challenge has been methodologically – third wave feminism tends to lack empirical investigation, and there appears to be no methodological literature based around the third wave. Mann and Huffman (2005) point out that doing research is not a particular concern of some strands of third wave thinking, because it can be perceived as a way of validating knowledge claims. However, Mann and Huffman (2005) stress (as do I) that doing research is important, principally in order to understand the breadth and depth of issues facing women today. Doing research doesn't exclude the idea that knowledge is constructed and is contingent – this can still be an acknowledged part of the research. But it is only by doing research that we highlight that discrimination isn't just the experience of one or two isolated individuals, but is systematic across the board. Research goes hand-in-hand with linking the personal with the political, and can go some way in re-politicising religion and other institutions. Currently, although my theory is based in the third wave, my methodological practice uses and modifies second-wave texts in order to have a feminist-inspired research study, as third wave texts on this area appear to be non-existent.

I suppose a final question may be why I was drawn to third wave feminism in the first place. I have tended to resist defining myself within any one particular feminist strand of thought. I've never felt entirely comfortable with the main tenets of second wave thinking, and it wasn't until I came across third wave feminism that I felt I'd found a home. The appeal of the third wave was mainly the fact that it hadn't been fully moulded and defined, like many second wave feminisms had. It felt like an exciting place to be, at the threshold of discovering a feminism relevant to the twenty-first century, and all the new conflicts this entails. Also important is the way in which third wave feminism stresses that women are intersected by numerous social divisions such as class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on, so that one's identity is weaved in a unique and interlocking way. Despite this, as I have already indicated, there are problems with third wave feminism – principally, theoretical and political input is often absent, and the whole wave analogy is questionable. Despite these problems, it still acts as a 'line of best fit'. It is not perfect, but engaging with this new space that has emerged for young people gives one the chance to experiment and to shape and mould this emerging theory, and have an input which may not be available in more established feminist theories. Putting the political

back in and engaging with questions about societal structures and their interaction with the social, and conducting concrete research is necessary in order to enhance third wave theories.

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