

RESOURCE 7.1

Four waves of Christian feminism: a case study [extended version]

Lat Blaylock invites teachers to plan to teach about feminism in RE through the lens of some exemplar Christians. A simple overview of some Christian contributors to key movements in feminist history is provided to share with students. Of course, many of these feminist thinkers and activists were – to use Rosemary Radford Reuther’s phrase – part of ‘the church against itself’.

Feminist history is commonly described in four waves. I like the metaphor: a large wave may come far up a beach with an incoming tide, then fall back. The next wave may come a bit higher. The progress of equality for women in religion and across the world has not been universal or always without setbacks. Sometimes in public discourse or in RE, Christianity – indeed all religions – are depicted as being inherently sexist, and trapped in patriarchy and misogyny. It’s easy enough to see why this happens, and there has been plenty of nasty Christian sexism over the centuries, and to the present day. But I’m arguing here that each wave of modern feminism has included those from within the heart of the Christian religion who have been part of the front rank of those providing egalitarian visions of gender. When young people study Christianity and equality issues in RE, then perhaps the study should include examples of women whose visions of fairness and justice between the genders are primarily spiritual,

Christian or religious. The same point can be made in relation to other religions which have been sexist in their past: it seems likely that the anti-sexist reform of Islam will be led by Muslim feminists and the anti-sexist reform of Buddhism will be led by Buddhist feminists. Will the anti-sexist reform of Humanism be led by Humanist feminists? I think so.

Here is a simple description of the four waves of modern feminism, and some examples from the last two centuries of Christian life of women who worked for equality in churches, theologically or politically. The viewpoint here begins from western concerns, with examples from the USA and the UK rather to the fore in the first instance, but Christianity is a global religion and its feminist exponents might be found from any continent. As indeed, its sexist practitioners and its defenders of inequality can be found everywhere. There are activities and learning tasks for students at the end.

Thinking things through

Split a page into four. Characterise the four waves of feminism in sequence from the article.

Read and discuss the key examples of Christian feminists given in the article. What were the key motivations, influences and impacts of these people?

Choose one of the women mentioned for further research and find out more about her, reporting back to your class.

In your understanding of the struggle for women’s liberation up until now, would you say the presence of Christian feminists in the narrative of feminism has been hidden or visible? Why do you think Christian feminists are often invisible, even within the history of the feminist struggle?

Some see religions, perhaps especially Christianity, as a negative force in relation to freedom for women. Can you give examples of this (maybe from scripture, history or contemporary life)? How would you weigh these examples in relation to the positive examples in the article?

‘If Christians are to be feminists it will be because they find an impulse to liberation within their religion, not because it is imposed from outside.’ Do you agree? Is the same point likely to apply to, for example, Muslims or Buddhists who are feminists?

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Four waves of Christian feminism: a case study [extended version] (cont)

Wave One: struggle for equal property rights and voting rights. 1830s to 1920s

Women's struggles in this period, from the early days of feminism, included seeking to be taken seriously in public discourse, to be seen by men and by themselves as humans of value, not as male property, nor as inherently weaker and inferior to men in mind, body or spirit. These struggles focused sometimes on the need to gain political power, including the widely denied right to vote and the right to claim ownership of their own bodies against those who would deny women their reproductive rights, sexual self-determination or economic independence. Other kinds of ownership rights – with regard to property of their own for example – are also relevant.

Emily Davidson (1872–1913), who famously died under the hooves of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby aged 41, so becoming the first feminist suffragette martyr, was a passionate and deep-thinking Anglican Christian. Her faith in God was a source of her courageous and fierce campaigning for equality. She believed in the idea of 'triumphant suffering' as a way of understanding both Christ's death and the sufferings heaped upon her feminist sisters – and herself. Just as Christ suffered on the cross but won a triumphant victory at Easter, so she believed that the women's movement would suffer and would need to take the pain of sexism, but would win final victory.



L. M. Montgomery (1874–1942) author of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), the first of a series of much-loved and often-reprinted novels for young people, held a vigorous Christian faith, always open to the splendour of nature as divine creation and God's gift. She was critical of some aspects of the practice of her own Canadian Presbyterian Christianity from within the Christian faith and created a feminist theology which sought to make a deep Christian spiritual connection to nature, alert to what it meant to be a woman in her times and her culture.

Catherine Booth (1829–1890) was a great early leader of the Salvation Army, wife of William Booth, its recognised founder. Perhaps they should jointly be called the founders of the Salvation Army. Catherine had read through the Bible eight times by the age of 12. She met William Booth, a Methodist minister in 1852. William had strong views on the role of church ministers believing they should be 'loosing the chains of injustice, freeing the captive and oppressed, sharing food and home, clothing the naked, and carrying out family responsibilities'. In 1860 Catherine Booth first started to preach. Her sermon was so impressive that William changed his mind about women preachers, coming to believe and teach that both women and men could serve Christ and the church in leadership. Catherine Booth soon developed a reputation as an outstanding speaker, but many Christians were outraged by the idea.



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Wave Two: equal rights, equal treatment, broad debates. 1950s to 1980s

The second wave of feminism is characterised by the demand for equality not just in voting but in society, relationships – including sexual relationships – and ultimately in all things. Theorising and analysis are often deeply philosophical and ethical, and lead to practical demands and campaigns. Second-wave concerns include sexual liberation, recognition of women’s work in homes, and developing feminist political programmes (e.g. within the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or setting up women’s refuges from domestic abuse and rape crisis centres). Emerging from new thinking in the 1940s and 1950s, this wave of feminism became much more visible in the 1960s. Thinkers like Simone De Beauvoir, French author of the seminal feminist study *The Second Sex* (1949) and the Australian Germaine Greer, who wrote the classic *The Female Eunuch* (1970) had as teenagers both rejected their Catholic Christian upbringing.

Rosemary Radford Reuther (1936–2022) was a feminist scholar of international stature and a lifelong Christian. She described her Catholic upbringing as ‘humanistic, free thinking and not oppressive’. She developed her feminist theology around the concept of all humanity reflecting the image of God, and became active in the USA’s Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. This made her very aware of the struggles of African American women and the intertwined realities of both sexism and racism in America. She became a lecturer at Howard University in the School of Religion, and immersed herself in the literature of liberation theologies that was emerging from Latin America, focused often on the demand for justice for the poor, but related to issues of gender as well. Her first book, *The Church Against Itself* (1967), engages vigorously with the doctrine of the church and the church’s common, traditional and oppressive views of gender, sexuality and reproduction. ‘The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive.’

Reuther, R.R. (1983) *Sexism and God-talk: toward a feminist theology* (Boston: Beacon Press)

Dorothy L. Sayers (1883–1957). Famous for her crime novels featuring Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers was also a playwright and poet. Her play about Christ, *The Man Born to be King*, is evidence of her profound Christian commitments, and she wove her feminism into the fabric of her Christian faith and thinking: this famous quotation about Jesus and his women companions and friends is widely used by Christian feminists:

‘Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man – there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised ... ?’

Sayers, D.L. (1946) ‘The Human-not-quite-human’ in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollanz)

Alice Walker, born in 1944, is an interesting example of a feminist – or, as she prefers, womanist – spiritual consciousness that connects to but is not enclosed by Christianity. In her best-known novel, *The Color Purple* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1982), her lead character says, ‘When I found God, I found her in my own heart, and loved her from the start.’ Walker’s concerns are first to develop an unoppressive womanist perspective as a means to uplift black women. She rejects the idea of ‘God the Father’, seeing it as patriarchal.



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Four waves of Christian feminism: a case study [extended version] (cont)

Wave Three: the micropolitics of gender equality 1990s—2010

Feminists who grew up in the 1960s and 70s enjoyed some benefits and some freedoms won by earlier activists in law and politics. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher became the UK's first female Prime Minister – but at the time only 3 per cent of MPs were women. In the third wave scholars and activists wanted to deconstruct the gender-essentialist identities that were dictated to them by men and by societies under patriarchy. Fighting patriarchy with irony and stylised playfulness became a new mode of assertive resistance to the culturally entrenched stereotyping and inequality. Male-only power was looking more ridiculous than in the times when people had been less aware of its negative influence. In the Anglican Church, the Movement for the Ordination of Women followed more progressive Christians such as Methodists, URC and Salvationists, who'd had female leaders much earlier. 1994 saw Anglican women priests. And Catholic Women's Ordination – CWO – began in March 1993: 'We want to be a part of building a church community that truly lives the justice demanded by Jesus; a justice which demands that women be equal with men.' (www.catholic-womens-ordination.org.uk)

Professor Nicola Slee is a British scholar, writer and activist from within the Christian community who has a lifetime's experience of working for feminist Christianity. Her book, *Faith and Feminism* (Darton, Longman and Todd 2003) is an introductory text offering an overview of Christian Feminist Theologies. She is an honorary Vice-President of WATCH (Women and the Church) and has been actively involved in Changing Attitude and LGCM (Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement), now OneBodyOneFaith.



The Queens Foundation, Anastasia Jobson



Photo by Christian Ender

Margaret Hebblethwaite was born in 1951. She is an influential Catholic writer from the UK with wide experience as a prison chaplain, religious journalist and in teaching. Since 2000 she has been a freelance missionary and educationalist in Santa María, Paraguay. Her books include *Motherhood and God*, and *Conversations on Christian Feminism*, co-written with academic Elaine Storkey. Her *Six New Gospels* is a creative and scholarly re-reading and re-writing of gospel narratives through the eyes of some key female figures from the Gospel record.

Elaine Storkey was born in 1944. She has been a tutor in philosophy at Manchester College, Oxford; a BBC broadcaster; director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity; and president of the international development charity Tearfund. She is a highly regarded feminist author, and her book *What's Right with Feminism?* (1985) urged evangelical Christians to reframe their understandings of gender, equality and God. In 2010 she and her husband Alan became founder members of Restored, an organisation committed to advocating against violence to women.



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Wave Four: gender fluidity, intersectionality and resistance to male power, 2010 and onwards

Recent years have seen a new wave of issues and methods in the struggle for equality and freedom for women the world over. The fourth wave, after 2010, is characterised by a fresh focus on the empowerment of women, increasing global consciousness of denials of women's rights and humanity, and intersectional campaigning that recognises connections between injustice towards women and other forms of oppression (racism, poverty) and privilege. The fourth wave demands equality for any oppressed group, and for those whose oppression is multi-layered. A criticism of earlier feminisms was that the whole project was mostly aimed to liberate white Western women who were already privileged, whereas the fourth wave is global. Some fourth-wave issues include standing against sexual assault or harassment e.g. through the #metoo movement or the #everydaysexism platform. The movement progresses in that it includes action on education, clean water, sanitary protection and anti-FGM campaigning wherever girls and women are marginalised, victims of violence and disempowered across the world. The fourth wave also makes fresh and effective use of internet tools to create a globally widening awareness of injustice against women. New consciousness for men also emerges from a rejection of the concepts of essentialism, and from the vision that gender identities are constructed under patriarchy rather than being 'essential' to the biology of our birth.



Reverend Mpho Tutu van Furth

is a priest in the Anglican church, born in South Africa in 1963. She grew up learning about oppression, racism and sexism from the apartheid state of South Africa. She was married, and raising her two daughters taught her more about feminism. She defines her mission in life like this: 'I am working to create

a world that is good for girls. For girls to flourish, our world must be safe, our environment clean, our planet healthy. For girls to flourish, their voices must be heard, their choices honoured, and their right to bodily integrity affirmed. When girls flourish the whole world flourishes.'

After her marriage ended, she began a new relationship with a woman with whom she fell in love, Marceline van Furth, and in 2016 they were married. Her church found a problem: could Mpho continue to work as an Anglican priest now that her gay marriage was public? Her church threatened to withdraw her licence to work as a priest. But Mpho preferred to hand it back herself, a more dignified step. When she was asked if she hoped the Anglican Church would eventually come round to adopt her views about LGBT+ issues, she said, 'No, but I believe they will come round to see God's way.' She wanted to go on serving as a priest partly because, as 'a woman with lipstick and very bright robes', she hoped young girls would notice that a person like her could be a priest. Her dad, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu, had announced in 2012 that if he arrived in heaven and found it was homophobic then he would not stay: 'No, I would say sorry. I mean I would much rather go to the other place.'

See bit.ly/MphoTVF_Guardian2016 and bit.ly/MphoTVF_PremierChristianity2022



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

is the youngest woman ever to serve in the United States Congress,

elected in 2019 aged 29. She is a Catholic Christian (with some Jewish ancestry as well). In an article for a Catholic newspaper, she described how her politics is influenced by her faith: 'A society that forgives and rehabilitates its people is a society that forgives and transforms itself, associating the 'radical kind of love' that that requires with the Lord's Prayer petition: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' She also identified the call in Mark's gospel to help 'the least among us' as a 'guiding principle' that compels us 'to care for the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick and – yes – the imprisoned.'

Ocasio-Cortez, A. (27 June 2018) 'Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on her Catholic faith and the urgency of criminal justice reform', *America* bit.ly/AlexandriaOC_America2018