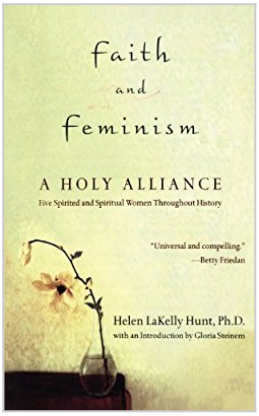

Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance

By Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.

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Why do so many women of faith have such a strong aversion to feminism? And why do so many feminists have an ardent mistrust of religion? These questions are at the heart of Helen LaKelly Hunt's illuminating look at the alliance between spiritual conviction and social action. Intelligent and heartfelt, *Faith and Feminism* offers a perceptive look at the lives of five spirited and spiritual women of history, women who combined their undying faith with feminist beliefs and who made the world a better place by doing so.
• ***St. Teresa of Ávila,*** a woman whose bravery in confronting her shadows gave her the strength to connect with the world and live a life of divine action.
• ***Lucretia Mott,*** a Quaker minister, who rose from her quiet upbringing to become a passionate speaker and activist working tirelessly on behalf of justice and peace.
• ***Sojourner Truth,*** a Christian slave, who spoke out with unwavering courage to claim her God-given rightful place as an African American and a woman.
• ***Emily Dickinson***, an extraordinary poet, who touched the world with her ability to capture and transform the experience of suffering.
• ***Dorothy Day,*** a radical journalist, who lived a life of voluntary poverty as a way of expressing her passion for the Christian faith and care for those in need.
A remarkable book that focuses on the idea that spirituality and feminism are really different expressions of the same impulse to make life more whole, *Faith and Feminism* offers a powerful catalyst for reflecting on our sense of self -- and for living and loving according to our deepest values.

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About the Author
Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D. used her education in psychology to help develop the Imago process as well as to support gender equity -- for which she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. She is in great demand as a public speaker.

Chapter 1: To Build a Dialogue

Attempting to bridge secular and faith-based feminism is very important. Women of faith feel that the rights movement is anti-religion, and the rights activists haven't made enough effort to listen to and include the women of faith. The social justice movement needs both voices. We need to be able to move to the next step, of dialogue between the rights world and the religious world.

-- Dorothy Q. Thomas

In past decades, many of us have been aware of a gulf between faith-based and secular feminism. On one side were activists who found religion indispensable to their activism. On the other were activists who found religion outdated, superficial, or perhaps just irrelevant to their activism. While on a personal level, there was some interaction between these two groups, an occasional casual friendship, on the philosophical level, there was a barrier. If a feminist happened to refer to her spiritual life in "mixed company," she was likely to be met with an embarrassed silence. But if she talked exclusively from a secular point of view, she was using the lingua franca of the movement, and nobody would raise an eyebrow.

Dorothy Q. Thomas, founding director of the Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Division and a 1998 MacArthur Fellow, has spoken eloquently about this division and the need for healing through dialogue. I agree with her. More women in the movement are looking for ways to reconnect and reintegrate secular and faith-based worldviews into a single, stronger feminism. In order to bridge the gulf, we need to consciously create opportunities to talk and to listen. Dialogue gives us a way to find common ground.

In 1995, I found an opportunity to engage in dialogue with women about faith and feminism. In the spring of that year, I was preparing to attend the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. It seemed to me that the conference was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to hear from women from all over the world about important issues in their personal and social lives.

I decided to interview conference participants about their thoughts on religion and the women's movement, and developed a survey consisting of three open-ended questions. The questions were designed to encourage my interviewees to share their personal experiences regarding religion and feminism. Originally, I had hoped to interview women from all over the world, but as I thought about it, I focused only on women from the United States. I had a hunch, which was later confirmed, that women from other countries might not split their faith from their feminism the way we do in the United States. My questions to American women were simple. Was the social activism of secular women and faith-based women unified and coordinated? Did they experience a split between the two? And if so, *why* was there a split? What should be done about it? I didn't know it then, but these questions became the impetus for this book.

The results were striking. *All* of the fifty women I interviewed said they felt a polarization. Not one of them

thought that secular and faith-based feminists were working in coalition or in harmony with one another. As they talked about the reasons for the split, many said that while spiritual matters were important to them personally, organized religion had been no friend to women. The institutionalized church has been one of the fiercest opponents of women's social and political equality. One of the women I interviewed put it most graphically: "Of course feminists shy away from religion. There is blood on the cathedral steps." She was talking about the blood of women sacrificed because of the church's doctrinal traditions.

She was right. The historical record of the church includes too many examples of women's oppression and too few documenting support for women's rights. I understand why feminists might want to stand apart from these male-centered ideologies and theologies. Why be a willing participant in an organization that has acted in opposition to its own core teachings on the equality and worth of all human beings?

If you are like me, this is a question you have asked yourself. All thoughtful people of faith must come to terms with the church's damaging contradiction between principle and practice on the subject of women's rights. I have wrestled with it for many years. Because I was raised in a Christian family, my spirituality has been nurtured within the Christian tradition. But I had to learn how to maintain integrity while practicing allegiance to a faith that I knew was deeply flawed when it came to being expressed in daily practice.

I admit to being led first by my heart in these matters. I love my faith. The beauty of the ritual and liturgy reminds me of the oneness of the entire human family. My faith makes clear to me that equality and justice are not just social constructs, but an ontology, part of the divine order of life. That we are all a part of a large web of connection that is sacred, if we have eyes to see.

For me, the brainwork comes later, after the love. Nevertheless, the brainwork has to be done. In order to be a Christian and a feminist, I must understand and reconcile apparent opposites. This reconciliation takes place within me every single day as the seeming contradictions of my faith and my feminism actually amplify and enlarge, even complete one another's core values.

What I know to be true is this: the crimes of any religious institution do not negate the value of universal love and the religious ideals at its core. Sadly, human institutions will always be flawed reflections of the values they hope to embody. Every women's organization falls short of its values and ideals as well, and the work of feminism is to name these ideals and to strive for them. If there is blood on the cathedral steps, we must also recognize the bloodshed inherent in combating political oppression. If we are so angry at the deeply flawed parts of religious institutions that we cut ourselves off from our spiritual birthright, we make no gains. Instead our anger is exacerbated by profound loss. I say preserve the anger, yes, but also preserve our right to our spiritual traditions. The patriarchy may have stolen our freedoms, but we don't have to be complicit in the abandonment of our souls.

Two Revolutions: Feminism and Religion

When I talk about Christianity and feminism, I do so with the awareness that each is a whole complex world of ideas and feelings. Although I am clear about the ways they are different, I see them springing from the same originating impulse. Both are revolutions of consciousness, a manifestation of the desire and need for inclusion and connection.

Early Christianity shook up the established order of life under Roman rule by proclaiming that freedom and grace belonged to *everyone.* Nearly two millennia later, early feminism (the 1830s) emerged with a similar message and made it more specific and inclusive. Then the second wave of feminism (the 1960s) articulated the message once and for all through the proclamation of the National Organization for Women, which

defined feminism as "the radical notion that women are people."

These two revolutions of faith and feminism, though very different, were built upon the same fundamental assumption: *every person is intrinsically as valuable and worthy of love as any other.* The implications of this revolutionary doctrine are staggering. Both Christianity and feminism did more than suggest a few fresh ideas to the prevailing worldview. They shook things up until a new world order emerged. The new Christian and the early feminist could see the kingdom of justice and equality for all was just within reach.

In their dynamic, pure form, both of these revolutions sought to enlarge our capacity for compassion and empathy. Both preached the transformation of the human mind and heart, and both have contributed to the evolution of new social orders. On a personal level, each of us separately can reflect on whether our experiences with Christianity and feminism have felt congruent. Have our feminist experiences been Christian? Have our Christian experiences felt feminist?

Feminism

I wanted to take some time to study the origins of American feminism, and in so doing, accidentally stumbled upon the abolitionist feminists of the nineteenth century, whose relatively unknown story needs to be told. These were women of color as well as white women, who knew that their country was founded on the ideal of "liberty and justice for all," and decided to take this declaration at face value. They took offense at the idea of a liberty that was for white men only. The same rights belonged to men and women of color, to poor people, to immigrants, to children; all humans were deserving.

The story begins with a fierce band of Quaker women who began to ponder the unequal treatment of women and people of color in the culture. In the silence of their meetings, a voice spoke to them and guided them to the work they needed to do in the world. They developed absolute certainty that God's law demanded freedom for all people. Slavery must end. They were confident that *they* were being called by God to bring this vision of justice into the world. No more taxation without representation. No more pay discrepancy. No more silence in the church. They tucked their Bibles under their arms and marched to the first abolitionist-women's rights meetings, propelled by the vision of this spiritual mandate.

Increasingly, scholars acknowledge that American feminism was rooted in the abolitionist movement, and that religion played a central role in condemning the institution of slavery and substantiating the need for immediate abolition. Women created many local female abolitionist societies. Representatives of these societies came together in New York in 1837, forming the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, the first national political women's meeting in America's history. Both black and white women met and began to break the taboo of speaking in public and petitioning in the political arena. Calling their work "the cause of God," this courageous band of 180 women saw themselves on a mission to unite Heaven and Earth, in the form of a society that would live and practice the democratic and religious ideals it espoused.

This convention has received relatively little study by historians. But the documentation of this meeting shows these earliest feminists to be revolutionaries and visionaries who had their eyes on a universal law that superseded man-made ecclesiastical and governmental laws of the day. I studied these earliest feminists for two years, focusing on how they were galvanized by their religious passion to act in radical revolution. They were catalyzed into action not by a social ethic, but by a belief in an ontology of connection -- that we are all meant to live in equality and harmony. It was this metaphysical vision that set fire in their hearts and started a social revolution. Having the conviction that something needed to change meant doing whatever was required. "This is a cause worth dying for," declared Angelina Grimke about her commitment to speak out against slavery.

The backlash against women meeting together publicly was severe. When these same women met again the next year, this time in Philadelphia, a mob of 10,000 men encircled the building, shouting and angrily throwing stones through the windows. It got to the point where no one inside the meeting hall could hear what was being said. When it was impossible to continue the meeting, the women filed arm in arm out into the street. While they were able to exit safely, the mob continued to riot around the meeting hall, breaking the doors and windows. They finally set fire to the building.

This public backlash to the women's convention was devastating in some ways but also galvanizing in others. Reading the women's diaries and other primary accounts of this event, I could feel the deepening resolve of these early feminists. It came naturally, from the deep springs of their faith in God. The women documented the proceedings of each convention, and these writings help us see how their faith and their courage to fight for social reform were intertwined. They began their meetings with prayer. Then they voted on public resolutions such as this one: "The time has come for woman to move in that sphere which Providence has assigned her, and no longer remain satisfied with the circumscribed limits with which corrupt custom and a perverse application of Scripture have encircled her." This statement is the first public call for women's rights in America.

I can't read these words without feeling stirred. And I find the phrase, "a perverse application of Scripture," to be a startling acknowledgment that the ecclesiastical structures of the day used religion as a weapon against women, especially against those who were fighting for the professed ideals at the heart of Christianity. This is not an unknown tactic in our own time. I am often embarrassed or outraged by fundamentalist doctrine that, in my view, has been used to set back the progress we've made in human rights. We must continue to be wary of the "perverse application of Scripture" for the purpose of justifying policies and institutions that keep people divided and excluded.

As I studied this early feminist organizing, I saw it was significant in other ways. The abolitionist feminists insisted on "Sympathy for the Slave" as the organizing motto. They worked in pairs, circulating petitions, and in groups on collaborative writing projects. And in so doing, they acknowledged their awareness that their abolitionist activism brought the values of empathy and relationship they had cultivated in their homes into the public realm. They had no intention of leaving behind the strengths and beliefs they knew would serve them well as they enlarged the sphere of action. Empathy and relationship -- two values desperately needed in public life today.

Ten years later, in 1848, what is generally acknowledged to have been the first women's rights meeting in America was held. Five women met in Seneca Falls, New York, for what became a notorious tea party where women plotted revolution. The women were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martha Wright, Jane Hunt, Mary Ann McClintock, and Lucretia Mott. They shared their outrage over not being allowed to participate in public meetings or have a voice in society. The decision was made at this small but historic meeting to place a notice in the newspaper calling for a Women's Rights Convention to be held at a nearby church. The purpose would be "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of Woman." The notice ran on July 14, 1848, and only five days later, three hundred people, including some forty men, attended the first Women's Rights Convention. About a hundred attendees signed their names to the famous Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Some of the same women attending this convention had helped plan the antislavery conventions, and their knowledge of protocol helped to make this gathering a great success. This Seneca Falls Convention is considered to have officially set in motion the most important social movement of America's history.

In her memoirs, Elizabeth Cady Stanton states that there was "a religious earnestness that dignified all the proceedings." While this meeting laid the groundwork for what became the suffrage movement, in truth, the

movement's social implications were broader than that. By starting with the issue of the vote for women, they were ushering in a social transformation that cut across the political, social, and economic structure of the country. Think of it! Five religious women sitting at tea, believing simply that God had called them to do the right thing, were catalytic in a groundswell movement to usher in social equity that is still reverberating in our lives.

It is remarkable that one of the most significant social revolutions of all time was fueled in large part by the personal convictions of a small band of nineteenth-century religious revolutionaries. I don't think we can begin to understand their actions if we don't make an effort to understand their faith. Nor can we understand their faith without looking more closely at their lives.

When we read their letters and study their public writings, we learn an interesting fact. Nineteenth-century feminists made a distinction between institutional authority and their own intensely personal religious experiences. The fact that the church wasn't supporting their efforts didn't mean that God wasn't supporting them, nor did it invalidate their religious faith. Those early feminists were filled with the confidence that their mission was an outgrowth of divine order and justice. They sorted out the issues wisely. Personal religious experience is not necessarily the same as organized religious doctrine. My concern is that as contemporary women we have lost the capacity to make this distinction. As far as I'm concerned, if a religious institution does not support an issue that is based upon Christ's teaching, it's imperative to challenge the institution, not necessarily the teaching.

Unfortunately, some feminists are immune to this difference. They have thrown the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. They have ignored the transformative power of religion because they deplore the stupidity and blindness of some of its practitioners. And many contemporary feminist historians have written the history of the women's movement solely from the point of view of the secular academy. They have not entered into the reality of these earlier feminists, nor truly listened to their words. This, combined with the fact that churches and temples have been among the strongest opponents of the women's movement, has created a vast chasm between faith and feminism.

Religion

As a political movement, feminism seeks to transform society by challenging and changing social institutions. Religion, on the other hand, seeks first to transform individuals through a personal relationship with God, which then results in a desire to work for the transformation of society. Religion and feminism share many common ideals.

Someone with a religious sensibility develops an acute awareness of certain questions. Do I live out my beliefs? Am I the same person in public that I am in private? Am I experiencing life as it is, delicately interconnected? Am I working from anger? Am I working from love? I know many women in secular feminism who function from this same place of integrity, but the religious feminists I know have an advantage. Their faith requires and supports the continuous exploration of these questions, and their communities of faith are there to help them find their way when the journey becomes difficult.

In order to talk about religious qualities as more than abstract ideas, let's explore how they become manifest in individual people. By listening to the voices and understanding the lives of women of faith, we will be able to see whether religion has enlarged or restricted their potential. From my study of the early feminists, it is clear to me that religion was far more to them than a source of comfort. It offered a process for integrating disparate experiences and provided a source of empowerment and transcendence that made these women giants. On a personal level, these early feminists overcame being called misfits and heretics by recognizing

that, in the larger view, they were extremely important to God. In them, self-examination and self-acceptance occurred in the same moment. They presumed themselves to be incomplete, but they knew they were accepted in their incompleteness and loved anyway. And this is the optimum mind-set for anybody who wants to undertake the hard work of social change.

As the women in this book show us, faith and feminism can work together to achieve the same ends. Both Christianity and feminism offer a prophetic vision for the future by inviting the transformation of the individual and of society. The two may be experienced differently, but they point us in the same direction.

This understanding was brought home to me at an annual fund-raising breakfast for the New York Women's Foundation, one of over a hundred women's funds that make up the Women's Funding Network. After the program, Florence Pert, an associate minister of Marble Collegiate Church, approached me. "You know what's really going on here, don't you?" she asked. "This isn't just about coming together to pool resources for women's causes, the way it's talked about. This is about church."

As I reflected on her comment, I began to understand what she meant. We each contribute to the split between faith and feminism when we think of them as dualities. Social action is as much an expression of the spiritual impulse as are prayer and ministry. Women's funds include those who are marginalized and left out of the rooms of power. They give voice to those who are voiceless. They reach out to women who are in prison because they carried drugs for their boy-friends. They provide material help to inner-city mothers struggling to work and care for their children. Florence Pert carries the belief, as do many women of faith, that whenever we act for the common good, we are engaging in spiritual action. Feminist activism fostering justice, equality, and love embodies the prophetic, powerful verse in Scripture: "Let justice roll down like waters..."

Healing the Split

In the twentieth century, feminism developed in opposition to religious authority and became a secular political movement. It has sponsored an honorable political agenda and achieved significant improvements in the economic and social lives of millions of people. But in this great work, the renewing, transformational language of the spirit has been obscured.

The women's movement has not found a way to reconnect comfortably with the religious impulse that was central to its origin. Ironically, we have emulated the male model of progress through separation rather than connection. Feminist social scientists, especially those at the Stone Center at Wellesley, have written about the female pattern of development, which, given that the mother and daughter have the same gender, emphasizes the importance of remaining *in relationship.* This is distinct from the male pattern, which encourages separation.

The feminist movement has not been able to stay in relationship with religion. We couldn't have separated faith from feminism more completely if we had been agents of the patriarchal system separating the concept of love from the concept of power. Will such separation continue to serve the larger purposes of the feminist cause? This is an important question for each of us to consider personally.

The severe secularism of the twentieth century appears to be softening, but a dangerous extremism also appears to be growing. More people now tend to talk about matters of the spirit, but as feminists and people of faith, we must acknowledge efforts to use religion as a political vehicle to compromise our human rights. Our task is to call upon the passionate faith of the abolitionist feminists that generates within us a moral courage, that moves us toward social justice, and that opens us to our indissoluble relationship to God and to

each other.

There is growing interest in examining the point at which the political and the spiritual intersect. Service to others is a spiritual value, and the overt recognition of this can be part of the development of our own wholeness. My hope is to add my voice to the chorus of other women who are calling for a bridge between the secular and the spiritual. Our effectiveness in building this bridge will depend on how well we connect to each other in every interaction. That means taking the time to listen to those who come from points of view that are different from our own. If we listen well, learn from one another, and find the ability to empathize with one another's experiences, I believe the split will have served us well. When a broken bone mends, it becomes stronger along the break. When we strengthen our connections to one another, we become whole. And when we are whole, we are empowered and can empower others.

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