God Gave Us the Right

Conservative Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism | By Christel Manning | Reviewed by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

In this carefully done ethnographic study, religion professor Christel Manning offers an intriguing assessment of the lives and beliefs of women in conservative religious traditions today. Manning surveys and assesses responses to feminist social values and the secular feminist movement by women in an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, a charismatic evangelical church, and a Catholic parish with a fairly large conservative constituency.

She finds that religiously conservative women are not all alike; different religious traditions produce different responses to the issues and tensions in their lives and communities. Manning also finds that these women share many concerns with women in general (e.g., balancing work and family, ensuring good child care, winning cultural respect for motherhood, discomfort with certain aspects of the feminist movement), and that they have accepted and appropriated many feminist values (e.g., vocational choice for women, equal opportunity and equal pay in the workplace, equal opportunity for political leadership and other positions of authority). However, religiously conservative women’s appropriation of feminist values is highly selective and individualized in their negotiation of roles, responsibilities, and authority in the home, and is nearly suspended altogether in their views of women’s place in the church or synagogue.

In religious conservatism, Manning notes, women’s ordination is typically seen “as a symbol of the liberal world they are trying to define themselves against” (p. 105). Thus, women in all three traditions believe women ought not serve in certain positions of religious authority. As a rationale for this restriction, Catholic women cite the doctrine of their church that the priest represents Christ and only a male can perform that function. Evangelical and Orthodox Jewish women tend to assert that women are not emotionally fit to lead a church or synagogue, or that women should leave this arena to the men because men need to feel that spiritual leadership is a manly responsibility.

The three traditions differ more significantly on what is perceived as definitive of woman’s role in the home. In the Orthodox Jewish community the separate spheres of synagogue (the male domain) and home (the female domain) require women to carry out the religious functions that center in the home, as well as the duties of motherhood. Submission to the husband’s authority is formally advocated by rabbinical teaching, but most Orthodox Jewish women see their role as that of spiritual leader of the home, which, indeed, appears to be the case.

For conservative Catholics, women’s role in the home is defined by motherhood and vocational homemaking, to which the ban on contraception obligates most women by default. An insistence
on submission to male authority in the home is not an element of conservative Catholicism; in fact, the women Manning interviewed considered it an irrational and ridiculous notion.

Traditionalist evangelical teaching also advocates homemaking as woman’s primary calling, but submission to male authority is emphasized. Manning found that evangelical women typically renegotiate the standard teaching on submission. “In practice,” Manning observes, “most women do not give their husbands much real authority” (p. 136). Some women bargain with patriarchy by outwardly “submitting” (i.e., appeasing the husband’s ego), but get their own way in the end through various manipulative strategies. Others creatively reinterpret the submission doctrine such that it effectively becomes mutual submission; thus, if a woman’s husband declares a certain decision to be God’s will and she disagrees, “she may ask him to reconfer with God” (p. 141) and not accept her husband’s decision unless she also sees it as God’s will.

Manning’s point is well taken that the traditionalist-prescribed evangelical gender roles are unworkable. The wifely homemaker/husbandly provider roles are unrealistic because of both economic realities (two incomes are often necessary) and human realities (women have interests and callings outside the home just as men do). Human realities also sabotage the wifely submission/husbandly authority roles. A woman is no less able than a man to process facts, form conclusions, discern God’s will, and arrive at decisions; simply telling her that this is a man’s job does not stop her mind from functioning as human minds tend to function.

Most of the women interviewed (evangelical women especially) expressed emphatic opposition to feminism as a cultural/political movement, perceiving it as based on the modern values of materialism and individualism, and intent on devaluing motherhood, negating gender differences, encouraging women to be like men, and promoting abortion and homosexuality as acceptable choices. Much of this disapproval seemed to be accompanied by an ignorance of the beliefs, goals, history, and types of feminism. Only a few (most among Orthodox Jewish women) believed that feminism has been largely good for women and society. Opposition to abortion and homosexual relations was fairly unanimous, although the different religious traditions gave rise to different reasons for opposing these practices.

Manning points out that the differences between the three traditions’ responses to feminist values and feminism are rooted in their different theologies and histories; evangelicals, for example, have the strongest tradition of antifeminism, dating from early twentieth-century fundamentalism. Also, each tradition has a different source of religious authority. For Orthodox Jews, it is halacha, or Jewish law, a large and somewhat diverse body of rabbinical teaching that is ever evolving through disagreement and discussion among all members of the community. For evangelicals, it is a “literally” interpreted inerrant Bible, which admits of individual interpretational variations on account of the believer’s “personal relationship with Jesus” and her “calling” received from God. For conservative Catholics, authority lies in the rulings of the pope and the bishops, which permit no debate or dissent.
For the most part, I found Manning’s delineations of the histories and varieties of feminism, evangelicalism, Catholicism, and Judaism to be precise, concise, and cogent. There were, however, a few exceptions to this clarity and precision, several of which I will note here.

I found myself annoyed whenever (roughly twenty times) she repeated, without definition or qualification, that evangelicals take the Bible “literally,” and that this is why they must avow female submission to male authority. Evangelicals’ literal reading of Scripture, she maintains, follows from their belief that the Bible is God’s Word and inerrant (p. 86, 112). Halfway through the book she offers her first clue as to what she means by a “literal” interpretation when she sets it over against a “contextual” interpretation (p. 116). She later equates contextual interpretation with disregarding certain biblical texts as outdated (p. 140). Evidently, if one is to be faithful to God’s inerrant Word, one must disregard context in interpreting the submission texts; to interpret contextually is to reject inerrancy and disregard these texts altogether. Manning’s paucity of categories on this score may reflect the confusion of theologically unschooled evangelicals, on whom it appears she primarily relied for her understanding of evangelical beliefs.

In discussing responses to the abortion issue, she opines that Catholic conservative women are “repackaging” the prolife cause as a feminist effort, in order to appeal to liberal Catholic women (p. 206). However, being prolife and prowoman is not a novel conceptual combination. This position was held by the early feminists of the nineteenth century—not for the rather disingenuous motive Manning suggests, but because they believed the abortion solution to an unwanted pregnancy does not liberate but degrades women.

Manning seems to display further ignorance of the historical and theological confluence of feminist and conservative beliefs in her superficial treatment of evangelical egalitarians (who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches mutual submission between women and men). She acknowledges the existence of Christians for Biblical Equality, yet her discussion of biblical equality is outdated and not integrated into her assessment of evangelical women’s responses to feminist beliefs.

Despite these and other quibbles, I recommend this book as an insightful and informative resource for anyone interested in the relationship between feminism, contemporary culture, and religious conservatism.

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