Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage

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In 1976 Donald Dayton wrote a book entitled Discovering an Evangelical Heritage, largely focusing on the leading role that evangelicalism played in nineteenth-century reform movements. He covers a wide range of personalities and institutions (Protestant denominations, colleges, seminaries) that led the way in the abolition of slavery and the advancement of women’s rights. Evangelicalism articulated the philosophical framework for these reforms—all people, women and men, Black and White, are created in the image of God and equally loved by a God who redeems and empowers all believers to do kingdom work. This message reached the masses through the revivals that spread across the English-speaking world during the early nineteenth century. That vitality was then lost in the twentieth century, largely due to what some scholars call “the great reversal.” Evangelical social reform was eclipsed by the devastation of the Civil War and World War I, by theological issues such as the fundamentalist/modernist split and the rise of pre-millennialism, as well as by social developments such as the arrival of thousands of new immigrants from non-Protestant backgrounds.

In the mid-twentieth century, when evangelicalism in the United States re-emerged into the public square, it was decidedly reactionary, especially on the issue of women’s roles in the church and family. This was indeed a great reversal of the trajectory established in the nineteenth century. Consequently, today, some people within the church and most nonbelievers are convinced that evangelicalism (and Christianity in general) is and always has been essentially misogynistic. For many Americans today, the best way to deal with Christianity is to either marginalize it or to remake it into a more socially progressive institution. Jesus followers today, however, need to rediscover their evangelical heritage. The historical record could actually be a powerful apologetic for our faith. What if Christianity was/is the fundamental source of Western notions of equality under the law, social justice, and equity? What if Christianity is the primary reason women in the West enjoy the freedoms and opportunities we have today? As we work for biblical equality, we need to know that we are carrying a torch that has a long, inspiring (and sometimes successful) history. We need to ask whether it is egalitarians or hierarchists who are out of sync with early evangelicalism.

Not only do we need to know our own history better, but we also need to debunk contemporary mythologies about the origin of woman’s elevated status in the West. Those mythologies abound in every direction. They appear in books (especially textbooks and novels), articles, movies, and casual conversations. As an example, I would like to consider the recent book, Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women’s Rights by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born feminist. As a young woman, she fled Africa and then the Middle East to find asylum in the Netherlands, where she went on to serve in the Dutch Parliament. Today Hirsi Ali resides in the United States. This book is a well-researched and shocking account of the crimes against women that have accompanied the large influx into Europe of asylum-seeking young men from Muslim countries in recent years. Although she acknowledges that harassment and abuse certainly existed in Europe prior to this influx, her book chronicles the significant increase in crimes against women associated with these asylum-seeking young men. Harassment, rape, and even gang rape are driving European women away from some public spaces and may be slowly eroding the freedoms and legal protections that women in Europe have enjoyed. Hirsi Ali accuses law enforcement and the courts of being complicit in this as they retreat from prosecuting Muslim criminals, fearing accusations of bigotry. Not only are women’s rights being slowly eroded, but the rule of law is also under fire, as some European countries are allowing Muslim-dominated communities to operate under Sharia law, even when it is in conflict with Western legal traditions.

As an example, Hirsi Ali cites the now notorious Silvesternacht in Cologne, Germany on December 31, 2015.

Around fifteen hundred men, mostly newly arrived asylum seekers of Arab and North African backgrounds, converged in the area between Cologne Central Station and the city’s famed Gothic cathedral to see in the new year. . . . The men were drunk, unruly, and—as soon became clear—beyond the control of the city’s police. They mobbed together to entrap women in the square, sexually harassing and assaulting any they could get their hands on, often stealing their wallets and mobile phones in the process. In the following months, 661 women reported being victims of sexual attacks that night.

As of spring 2019, only three men had been found guilty of sex crimes in connection with this event. Hirsi Ali builds a strong case for her central thesis, that European authorities are unwilling or unable to prevent Muslim men from attacking women in public places.

However, despite copious amounts of research and attention to detail, Hirsi Ali falls short in one area. She falls short when trying to explain the sources of the elevated status of women in the West. She acknowledges that “the very concept of women being equal to men is a relatively new one. It emerged only in the West and despite its advancements—from the right to vote to protection from discrimination in the workplace—has yet to achieve the complete equality to which feminists aspire.”

At no point does she identify Christianity as a source of female emancipation in the West. In fact, at every turn she sees
Christianity as a negative. Like all other major world religions, it is/was a source of misogynistic oppression. The last chapter in her book is entitled “Conclusion: The Road to Gilead.” In that summary chapter, she draws together two misogynistic religious traditions as follows: “Margaret Atwood published The Handmaid’s Tale in 1985 to warn that American evangelical Christians might one day succeed in establishing a patriarchal regime in the United States—or at least part of it, as ‘Gilead’ is supposed to be in New England. Most of her readers appear to have missed the fact that something very like this had already happened in the Muslim world...” Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, will establish a “patriarchal regime” if given the opportunity.

Fortunately, in Hirsi Ali’s eyes, other countervailing forces have triumphed in the West. The rest of this article will be an examination of those countervailing forces because her historical position represents widely held beliefs in popular culture and, to some extent, in academia.

**Monogamy**

Her first pillar of Western exceptionalism is monogamous marriage. She rightly observes that polygamy gives rise to less prosperous and more violent societies. In polygamous societies, “women marry young and men marry old, fertility rates are high, women are sequestered like commodities...” In the West, Hirsi Ali credits the Greeks and the Romans with establishing monogamy as the norm. “Today, the vast majority of places where polygamy is legal are Muslim-majority countries situated in Africa and Asia. By contrast, ever since ancient Greece and Rome went down the very different route to monogamy, the West has prohibited both polygyny and polyandry.”

**Separation of Church and State**

A second pillar of western exceptionalism is the separation of church and state. Hirsi Ali sees Islamic theocracy as the great source of misogyny in certain Islamic countries. If Christianity were allowed to rule, it too would be a great oppressor, but fortunately that has not happened in the West. “A number of conservative Jewish communities and Christian denominations have comparable views of the innate inferiority of women to men. But because Islam fuses instead of separates politics and religion, the inferiority of women is enshrined in holy law in the Muslim world.” There is no doubt that the West has benefitted from the fact that there have always been at least two voices (often more) in the marketplace of ideas. This two-kingdom idea dates back to Augustine—and Jesus. However, there were many kings who would be pope and popes who would be king.

**The Enlightenment**

Although, in recent years, the Enlightenment has come under greater criticism, many still refer to it as the great emancipator of women. Hirsi Ali is in this camp. In commenting on John Stuart Mill’s book, The Subjugation of Women (1869), she says, “beginning before Mill in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and continuing into our own time, liberalism produced the language, legal systems, and tools that would improve the position of women in the Western countries.” She repeatedly lauds Enlightenment liberalism as the foundation of Western traditions of the rule of law, individual rights, and equality. The problem is that historians who have looked closely at the eighteenth-century Enlightenment have found very little connection between the Enlightenment and the early women’s rights movement.

A recently published tome on the Enlightenment, entitled The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680–1790, by Ritchie Robertson, devotes an entire section to explaining how
the Enlightenment had a negligible impact on the emancipation of women. Robertson finds it remarkable how many prominent male Enlighteners enjoyed the company of intelligent women yet declined to advocate for granting them a larger public role. “Voltaire maintains that there have been learned women, warrior women, but no female inventors.

Diderot likewise thinks that biology is destiny: women’s possession of a womb predisposes them to hysteria and explains the larger number of female visionaries.”16 There were some lively discussions that challenged the status quo, but in the end, Robertson concludes that those discussions produced little institutional change. During the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges attempted to extend the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” to include woman. Her plea was ignored. In the end, the revolutionaries sided with their favorite philosophe, Rousseau: “The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive.”17

American Enlightenment figures differed little from their European counterparts. The liberal and enlightened Benjamin Rush (signer of the Declaration of Independence) wrote to a young friend on the eve of her wedding: “You will be well received in all companies only in proportion as you are inoffensive, polite, and agreeable to everybody. . . . Don’t be offended when I add that from the day you marry you must have no will of your own.”18 Although the eighteenth-century Enlightenment adopted many of the political and social principles which were unleashed during the religious turmoil of the seventeenth century, they were grounded in reason and natural law, not revelation. Consequently, “biology is destiny” replaced “in souls there is no sex.” Moralism replaced a passionate, personal piety, and that did not elevate the status of women. So, what did? **An Evangelical Heritage**

Two streams of Protestantism converged to give women a voice. The left wing of Puritanism combined with evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to lay the foundation for actual institutional change. These were the sources of the early women’s rights movement. One sect of radical Puritanism was the Levellers. They collapsed the spiritual and civil kingdoms into one (their version of theocracy), applying basic Protestant beliefs to the civil kingdom and consequently supporting projects like religious toleration, universal human rights, constitutional reform, and democratic elections. In 1648/49, the Leveller women presented a petition to Parliament pleading for an equal interest with men in the liberties protected by the Petition of Right. (The original Leveller women’s petition had ten thousand signatures.) Their petition begins, “Since we are assured of our creation in the image of God, of an interest in Christ equal to men, as also of a proportionate share in the freedoms of the Commonwealth . . . .”19 Created in the image of God, empowered by Jesus Christ to be agents of his kingdom in

**Created in the image of God, empowered by Jesus Christ to be agents of his kingdom in the here and now—these were the powerful ideas that propelled women into the public square.**

Alice Paul, to name a few.

Evangelical revivalism also gave women a voice, sometimes reluctantly. But examples of women in the pulpit in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would eventually empower other women to step out of the shadows and make an impact on the communities and nations in which they lived. For example, evangelist Harriet Livermore preached to large crowds in the U.S. Hall of Representatives four times, about one hundred years before women could serve there as congresswomen.20 Within evangelical revivalism, including Methodism, there was something often referred to as “gospel liberty.” (The idea can also be found in Calvin’s *Institutes* and Luther’s writings.) This gospel liberty gave women the right to speak publicly in church and religious gatherings as preachers and exhorters, a right they did not enjoy in the broader culture.21 In the English-speaking world, spiritual equality preceded social, civil, and legal equality. The Enlightenment had nothing to do with it.

What was unique about the nineteenth century was that women began to step out of religious meetings and spaces and speak to the public at large. In her book entitled *Pioneer Women Orators: Rhetoric in the Ante-Bellum Reform Movement*, Lillian O’Connor identifies twenty-seven women as the first female public speakers in the United States. O’Connor describes them as follows: they all spoke on behalf of the rights of other groups, their primary text was the Bible (especially among the earliest public speakers), and most spoke in what O’Connor calls “pulpit style.”22 This was, of course, because the pulpit was where they first learned to speak. Because these women were advocates of reform, usually abolition or temperance, many perceived them as persons of high moral character in spite of addressing “promiscuous assemblies” (men and women together). These women soon discovered, however, that to do the work God had called them into, they needed rights and opportunities not normally accorded to women. This is how first wave feminism was born, a deeply biblical movement.

The nineteenth century then exploded with challenges to the economic, social, educational, and political barriers faced by women. Dayton catalogues evangelical involvement in many of the subsequent changes. For instance, Oberlin College, the first coeducational college in the world, was founded to
perpetuate the revivalism and social justice commitments of evangelist Charles G. Finney. Jonathan Blanchard, important in the early history of Wheaton College, B. T. Roberts, founder of the Free Methodist Church, and A. J. Gordon, a major figure behind Gordon College and later, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, all shared convictions that women should exercise greater leadership in the church. Individual women, like Catherine Booth (1829–1890) of the Salvation Army, Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911) of the British Keswick Conventions, Frances Willard (1839–1898) of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, worldwide evangelist and temperance worker Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874) of the Holiness movement, evangelist Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861–1927), and abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883) and Harriet Tubman (1822–1913) made outstanding contributions to social reform (including women's suffrage) and kingdom work in the nineteenth century. This is just to name a few.

Conclusion

Hirsi Ali describes the nineteenth century as a time when women had "a more circumscribed existence" largely because of the constraints of religion. This is at odds with the evangelical heritage that we have just rediscovered. It was quite the opposite. Christianity laid the foundations for the nineteenth-century women's rights movement and is the true reason for the elevated status of women in the West.

Notes