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The strength of rhetoric in Christian conservative and radical feminist movements: comparisons and outcomes

Connor Evans Moreland

Over the course of the latter twentieth century in the western world there has been a rise of several notable grassroots and counter cultural movements. This article aims to expose the similarities between two of these influential movements: Christian social conservatism and radical and cultural feminism, and to emphasize how both of these movements are largely founded upon a strong, unmovable rhetoric and the use of folk devils and an overall fear of any outside influence in order to legitimize their fears over a perceived threat. This article will also examine how changing perceptions and ideologies within both the Christian right and the radical feminist movement have resulted in a backlash amongst those who consider themselves the 'true' practitioners of their respective movements ideologies.

When analysing the cultural movements of the latter half of the twentieth century in the Western world it is important to explore their structures and ideologies, not as the products of static events and situations rooted in either the purely confrontational or as culturally and morally accepted notions of an idealised past, but instead as universal experiences, shared across cultures. This article will build upon this approach by analysing how these concepts can be applied to two very different examples of western identity politics. The similarities between these cultures in their approach to these concepts will then be analysed through the use of sociological theory, in order to explain why competition and tradition are so firmly rooted in these cultures, and yet at the same time, exist in a state of fluidity that means that they can represent completely different values.

AMERICAN SOCIAL CONSERVATIVES AND THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Practitioners of American social conservatism can be said to exist, and to be motivated almost entirely within their own self-created rhetoric. The most obvious example of this can be seen within the context of the so-called 'culture

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wars¹, in which a morally absolute battle for America's very future is fought between those who support family, faith and the American way, and those who are seen as forcing a politically correct, anti-family and wholly anti-God rhetoric on 'the silent majority'.

This approach to political mobilisation appears to have some influence over both corporate and public opinion, and can be perceived as being somewhat legitimate. An example of this would be the controversy surrounding *Chick-fil-A* CEO Dan T. Cathy over comments he made on same-sex marriage,² stating that 'God's judgment' was coming as a result.³ Cathy came under criticism from LGBT rights organisations for his views, with several protests and campaigns being organised to show contempt for his restaurant chain⁴. However, amidst this call to resistance appeared a large, grassroots show of support from the Christian Right. 2008 Republican Presidential candidate, Mike Huckabee, was amongst those who openly chose to show their support.

Taking advantage of social media outlets, Huckabee designated a 'Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day'⁵, in which customers could show their support for *Chick-fil-A* by coming out in large numbers and eating there. This campaign was clearly a success⁶. The popular media reporting put particular emphasis on the sheer length of the lines amongst those waiting to be served, as well as the unexpectedly large turnout. This resulted in the 'silent majority' of conservative Christians now turning more vocal. The media could no longer dismiss Christian fundamentalists as a vocal minority, a relic from a more ignorant past. The numbers spoke for themselves, and the media would frame these numbers alongside those who were protesting, as to create the impression that both sides of the debate were now on equal standing and were both legitimate.

¹ L. Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?* (USA, 2006), 22-23.

² M. Collier, *Chick-fil-A President says 'God's Judgement' Coming Because of Same-Sex Marriage* in *The Christian Post* (July 18 2012).

³ Ibid.

⁴ M. T. Hall, *Gay-rights supporters kiss in, kiss off Chick-fil-A in U-T San Diego* (August 3 2012).

⁵ A. Bingham, *Chick-fil-A Supporters Line Up for Appreciation Day* in *Abc News* (August 1 2012).

⁶ A. Bingham, *Chick-fil-A Has 'Record-Setting' Sales on Appreciation Day* in *Abc News* (August 2 2012).

Another example of this phenomenon would be that of the controversy surrounding the star of the A&E reality television programme *Duck Dynasty*, Phil Robertson. After Robertson was accused of making homophobic comments during an interview with GQ magazine⁷, A&E network suspended Robertson out of fear of being associated with his controversial beliefs. However, upon hearing the news that Robertson was punished for his traditional Christian beliefs, many fans and conservative Christians reacted with shock⁸. A large grassroots movement sprung up. Like the *Chick-fil-A* controversy, the number of supporters for Robertson would have an impact on the media, with the controversy providing a clear incident that would visualise the culture war in terms that would be more comfortable for the religious right than the left; freedom of speech was now apparently under attack, and the right would emphasise this to claim legitimacy. By appealing to the American institution of free speech, the Christian Right was able to use a concept that appealed to the apolitical majority to boost its own argument. Like the *Chick-fil-A* controversy, the Robertson incident would prove the often claimed belief amongst the Christian Right that their traditions were held amongst a sizable number, and that the liberal media were actively competing for social acceptance of 'deviant' sexual behaviour⁹.

These examples of political consumerism, and what it can tell us about the Christian Right, as well as the changes that the introduction of postmodern institutions such as the mass media have brought onto sociology, are important for a number of reasons. It is clear that an overtly competitive atmosphere can be seen not just in these controversies but in the Christian Right movement in general, both historically and today. Christian Right organisations and pressure groups frequently and repeatedly refer to the notion of 'spiritual warfare', and references to being 'at war' with the Devil and his army are not uncommon¹⁰. The 'culture war' for America's future carries with it moralist implications, with emphasis being on the clear divide between good and evil, God and Satan, the moral

⁷ D. Magary, *What the Duck?* in GQ (January 2014).

⁸ *Reactions to Phil Robertson's suspension, supporters question A&E's decision: 'Miley Cyrus gets a laugh but Phil Robertson gets suspended'* in *Christian Today* (20 December 2013).

⁹ *AFTAH stands with Duck Dynasty's Phil Robertson against GLAAD's 'Homo-Fascist' Campaign to Demonize Him* in *Americans For Truth About Homosexuality* (December 19 2013).

¹⁰ Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 135.

majority and the Hollywood progressives forcing their values down the throats of a hard-working, simple majority¹¹.

This rhetoric, based on a clear moral compass and an unmovable ideology based on affirming itself, creates many opportunities for threats to appear. Any new social movement that appears can be dismissed as being evil by biblical standards, with analysis of why this is so being a secondary concern to be added later. Thus, analysis comes only after a culture is judged by static biblical morality. Homosexuality and abortion are evil because the bible tells us so, and any social problems related are simply evidence that God is right. There is little room for critical analysis amongst the Christian Right community.

This brings us directly to the Christian Right movement's largely self-constructed approach to tradition. Tradition exists amongst Christian Right organisations largely as nostalgia for a vaguely defined 'golden age' of Christian identity, consisting of universally shared moral standards on sexuality and lifestyle. The consensus amongst the movement can be said to be that these values, as well as a Christian identity, still exist as a 'silent majority' and that the persuasive role that the mass media has had in promoting homosexuality, promiscuity and violence are presumably drowning out the voice of 'real' America¹².

The growth of the mass media, the most notable example being the internet, has given this claim of a 'silent majority' some legitimacy. While the overwhelming wave of support from working class, seemingly average Americans during the *Chick-fil-A* controversy provided a rare visual example of this in motion, it should also be noted that a clear process of political and consumerist mobilization by both religious and political leaders was also seen.

One example of this would be during the AIDS crisis in the 1980's, in which pastor and leader of predominant Christian Right pressure group *Moral Majority*¹³, Jerry Falwell, mobilised fellow Christians against the AIDS crisis, or rather those

¹¹ *Translating the Democrats' 'Gay Pride' Proclamation in Americans For Truth About Homosexuality* (June 5 2008).

¹² L. Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 182-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

who could be easily blamed for it, i.e. homosexuals and the sexually promiscuous¹⁴. The AIDS crisis would benefit the Christian Right movement by providing the movement's notions of traditional sexual morality with a sense of legitimacy. In terms of which morality was destined to save America, AIDS would arguably show that the values of the Christian Right were 'right all along.'¹⁵ This shows that the Christian Right, both in the past and today, has focused its efforts upon mobilizing large grassroots movements to influence society and politics.

By appealing to the Christian Right's nostalgia through conservative sexual values, religious leaders could engineer a moral panic regarding homosexuals. An example of this would be Anita Bryant's *Save our Children* campaign. Throughout the late 1970's, Bryant and her organisation would repeatedly attempt to link the gay rights movement directly to paedophilia¹⁶. Although Bryant's rhetoric has not aged well, attempts at linking homosexuality and gay rights to paedophilia have not disappeared.

Instead, it could be argued that the growth of the mass media has only allowed such views to be broadcast further. The LGBT rights movement is now using the internet as a platform for their activism, much of which is now aimed at young adults, such as the *It Gets Better* campaign, which is advocated by many popular celebrities¹⁷. This allows the Christian Right to claim legitimacy by claiming that these campaigns, which put increasing focus upon LGBT youth in schools, are both a threat to traditional values and an aggressive attack by the gay lobby, with intentions of recruiting the young. Comparisons to paedophilia are often made¹⁸. Linda Harvey, a committed anti-LGBT activist and founder of Christian Right organisation *Mission America*¹⁹, paints a uniquely dystopian image of what she sees as the natural conclusion of the LGBT rights movement in her *World Net*

¹⁴ M. Kitzinger, *Introduction in The Circuit of Mass Communication* (London, 1998), 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ W. Hudson, *From Anita Bryant to Today: 'Critical Thinking' Debunks the 'Save our Children' Argument* in *The Huffington Post* (January 3 2013).

¹⁷ The *It Gets Better Project* accessed at <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/> (February 2 2014).

¹⁸ P. Baklinski, *The real agenda behind gay anti-bullying clubs in your school* in *Lifes Site News* (September 6 2011).

¹⁹ *Mission America: Christian Commentary on the Culture* accessed in <http://www.missionamerica.com/> (February 2 2014).

Daily article, *Josh is taking Matt to the Prom*.²⁰ Harvey creates a dystopian future, made possible through excessive hate crime legislation and the acceptance of non-biblical lifestyles. To quote:

With same-sex dating an accepted fact of life, homophobia will be defined as even a raised eyebrow of objectification to the new regime. So open, aggressive ogling and come-ons will be the daily locker-room life of every boy who takes gym.²¹

An emphasis on biblical morality as being the only possible construct for society is emphasised in almost every aspect of Christian conservative politics. Any social movement that begins outside the contexts of this uniquely American institution is immediately dismissed as a threat, with the gay rights movement being the most modern example. Increasing secularisation has only strengthened feelings of persecution, and so the grassroots movements raised are only the natural result of this sense of persecution amongst the Christian Right reaching boiling point.

RADICAL FEMINISM, LESBIAN FEMINISM AND CULTURAL FEMINISM

Another subculture that exists on notions of threat, resistance and a morally static culture would be the radical feminist movement, which reached its most radical during the 1970s and the early 1980s²². While the values of the radical feminist movement are almost the exact opposite of those of the Christian Right, some similarities are also seen, especially in regards to the creation of its own folk devils and its focus on creating new traditions based on cultural identity.

An example of this would be the belief amongst radical feminists in 'sexual politics', a concept that is often encapsulated through the phrase 'the personal is political.'²³ It can also be argued that the Christian Right itself adheres to its own form of sexual politics, through its promotion of the traditional family unit as

²⁰ L. Harvey, *Josh is taking Matt to the Prom* in *World Net Daily* (August 9 2004).

²¹ Ibid.

²² A. Levy, *Lesbian Nation: When gay women took to the road* in *The New Yorker* (March 2 2009).

²³ L. Napikoski, *The Personal is Political* accessed in

<http://womenshistory.about.com/od/feminism/a/consciousness_raising.htm> (February 2 2014).

being the only culturally acceptable model of sexuality. Many radical feminists have essentially the complete opposite of this view of sexual politics. Instead, marriage is seen as a patriarchal system based on oppression, with some radical feminists advocating political lesbianism as a revolutionary response to the oppressive nature of sexuality itself²⁴. It should be noted that the 'political lesbianism' advocated at this time was not explicitly sexual as much as it was a form of celibacy.

Like the Christian Right of today, radical feminism was largely grounded in establishing a unique identity and a sense of a shared tradition and culture. However, this tradition was new and formed from the desire to redefine femaleness as being a cultural, rather than a purely biological trait, with the concept being that the identity of 'woman' came before any categorisation of ethnicity, religion or nationality. Women were to be something of a proto-nationality, defined by their biological status as women before any other cultural, social or racial ties.

Alternative spiritualities, which emphasised nature as being female, such as the kind offered by Zsuzsanna Budapest²⁵ and the work of philosopher Mary Daly, would also prove to be central in the creation of this cultural and spiritual feminism²⁶. To quote Daly on patriarchy's destruction of nature, which she judged as being spiritually female:²⁷

This is an extremist book, written in a situation of extremity, written on the edge of a culture that is killing itself and all of sentient life. The Tree of Life has been replaced by the necrophilic symbol of a dead body hanging on dead wood.²⁸

Labels of 'womyn' and 'wimmin' were regularly adopted, as to emphasise the movement's cultural uniqueness and separation from a culture that was seen as

²⁴ S. Jeffreys, Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, *Love Your Enemy?*

²⁵ The Official Website of Z. Budapest . Available: <<http://zbudapest.com/>> [Accessed 2.02.2014].

²⁶ M. Daly *Gyn/Ecology*,(London, 1978), 422-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

nothing more than an extension of patriarchy and women's oppression²⁹. Women's culture now had to define what a woman was in order to determine if they could be included in what was to be a universal movement consisting of all women. Boundaries had to be set on what constituted femaleness. Transwomen, for example, lacked both certain female biological functions and the factor of being born as women. Their rejection would be based on this rhetoric of women's culture, while also using analysis based on victimhood to legitimise itself. This cultural uniqueness was fundamentally based on biology more than anything else, as the female body was seen as the basis for oppression. This was also seen as largely indifferent to the historical basis of culture, as it was argued that history was a male concept, artificial and mostly indifferent to women.³⁰

As this culture was new and, therefore, vulnerable, defences had to be set up. Like the Christian Right, in its unwavering support for the family and its intuitional grounding in social conservatism and tradition, radical and cultural feminists would increasingly focus their movement's energies upon the defence of 'women's spaces', with some going as far as to live a separatist lifestyle, removing themselves from men entirely³¹.

This fragility raised tensions between the radical/cultural feminist movements and both mainstream society and the liberal branches of feminism. An example of this difference would be radical feminism's approach to transsexuality.

As the Christian Right has historically done, and is continuing to do, the radical feminist movement would go on to have its very own folk devils. Not unlike the Christian Right's fears over sexual minorities invading and destroying their values and traditions through aggressive cultural competition, radical feminists too identified a social group that play out this invading role for their ideology.

²⁹ S. Lucia-Hoagland, ed. *For Lesbians Only*, (London, 1988), Used throughout.

³⁰ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*,(London, 1978), 17.

³¹ Revolutionary Lesbians, *How to stop choking to death or: separatism in For Lesbians Only*, 22-24.

Male to female transsexuals would prove to be a controversial issue amongst radical feminists. Radical feminist academics, such as Janice G. Raymond³² and Mary Daly³³, regularly denounced the experiences of transwomen, with the recurrent theme being that of the transgendered community as an invasive force, seeking to redefine, colonise and steal female identity from ‘women born women.’

Janice G. Raymond’s 1979 work *The Transsexual Empire* is perhaps the most infamous example of this theme of transwomen as invaders of female space. Raymond claims for instance that:

All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women’s sexuality and spirit.³⁴

This view of transpersons as existing primarily to invade and attack women is shared by the Christian Right. Both groups consider transsexuality an artificial creation, formed from the worst aspects of both a patriarchal and god-hating society, respectively, and they exist as an image of a clearly defined ‘enemy.’

However, it should be noted that *The Transsexual Empire* has noticeably weak foundations when examined from a sociological perspective. For example, Raymond accuses transwomen of attempting to violate ‘women’s spirit’ from cisgendered women³⁵. However, just what ‘women’s spirits’ actually are is not given much depth. This proves its failure as a sociological or scientific work, and instead lets itself be known as a book written out of fear and vulnerability.

Raymond generally defines womanhood through biology and chromosomes³⁶. Nevertheless, as her work is intended to explore and criticise transsexuality primarily as a social and political issue, there is little to no basis for a sociological

³² J. G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (New York, 1994).

³³ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 420.

³⁴ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 104.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

critique of trans individuals. Instead, Raymond relies on a vague, simplified and biased view of transwomen, based almost entirely upon a traditional assumption of womanhood as consisting entirely of biology first, with gendered socialisation being a result of said biology. To quote:

Surgery may confer the artifacts of outward and inward female organs but it cannot confer the history of being born a woman in this society.³⁷

This creates a notable shift in ideology, from social construct based radical feminism to biologically deterministic cultural feminism. This shows how analysis of femaleness can be stretched to suit an overall rhetoric of invasion and victimhood.

Raymond's constant emphasis on transwomen as a threat to cisgendered women creates a clear moral division inspired by the environment of radical and cultural feminism. The right to the female experience itself becomes something of a social prize. Once this sense of 'true' womanhood (itself being largely grounded upon the new 'traditions' discussed earlier) is won, a clear environment of competition between 'real' feminism (radical lesbian feminism) and those who operate under the label of a feminism considered less legitimate, such as liberal or socialist feminism, is established³⁸. Heterosexual and bisexual women, considered tools of patriarchy at best, are also approached with much contempt in radical lesbian politics³⁹. Much of this competition is formed and fought only through what its own ideology considers a threat to the very existence of the movement and its integrity.

Mary Daly's 1978 work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism*, which in itself would essentially form the basis for cultural feminism, paints a picture of the metaphorical battleground that radical feminism has with those seeking to influence it with liberal politics. Set in a fictional 'Un-convention'

³⁷ Ibid., 114.

³⁸ Revolutionary Lesbians, *How to stop choking to death or: separatism in For Lesbians Only*, 22-24.

³⁹ C.L.I.T Collective, *C.L.I.T statement no. 2 in For Lesbians Only*, 362-64.

which is populated mainly by the enemies of radical feminism, Daly writes of a group of ‘Obsessors:’

It is also noted that among this faction there are some who appear to be eunuchs. One is carrying a placard which reads: ‘I am a lesbian-feminist male-to-female transsexual. Take me in.’⁴⁰

Sheila Jeffreys is also highly critical of transsexuality. Her writings allow insight into the conflict, not just between radical feminists and heteronormative society (which despite sharing similar views on transsexuality, are divided on the nuclear family), but also between radical lesbian feminism and the inclusive and postmodernist queer branch of the LGBT movement. In *Unpacking Queer Politics*, Sheila Jeffreys criticises female-to-male transsexuality. She refers to transmen as engaging in ‘the destruction of lesbians’ and considers the radical, largely sex-negative beliefs of the 1970’s and 80’s as being ideologically pure and having nothing but the best intentions for women⁴¹. To quote:

Women who had previously identified as butch lesbians, or been afraid to identify as women despite loving women, began to opt for surgical mutilation. I call this the destruction of lesbians, because lesbians are physically destroyed in this surgery.⁴²

This shows that the concept of traditional sexual politics amongst the aging members of the original radical feminist movement continues to operate (although in a largely reduced capacity when compared to the movement’s height in the 1970s), largely on the basis of social competition with those who are enrolled within the ranks of the ‘Queer’ movement of modern LGBT activism due to their differing values.

Clear similarities can be seen between these groups regarding how they construct folk devils, through the manipulation and conceptual stretching of analysis to better suit their own agendas. Both movements exist today, with Christian

⁴⁰ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 420.

⁴¹ S. Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics* (Oxford, 2003), 1-8.

⁴² *Ibid*, 122.

conservatism being more visible, while Radical Feminism largely exists as an online movement.

Both are also notable for claiming legitimacy as being the 'true' vanguards of their movements, and thus still exist regardless of negative public reception, due to shared belief that both are the only legitimate forms of Christianity and Feminism remaining, and that the more liberal strands popular today are the result of the rhetoric being clouded by the influence of outsiders and postmodernism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when examining and attempting to properly analyse the broad concepts of competition and tradition, it is important to note that both of these concepts can be considered broad enough and fluid enough to be defined more by how individuals, organisations and subcultures entrench them within their own cultures and morality systems, rather than any historical concept.

The reason that these cultures have been chosen for comparison is relatively simple: the Christian Right and radical lesbian feminism, despite being opposites in regards to moral values, such as family, heteronormativity and spirituality, are otherwise able to provide a number of surprising similarities. These include, but are not limited to, a negative attitude towards explicit sexuality and the focus on a strong, unmovable cultural identity based on shared values and traditions.

The greatest similarity seen throughout this article is the creation of folk devils for the purpose of defending their communities from outside influence. These examples provide the key argument that these beliefs are fluid and its creation can sometimes be largely based upon what is considered crucial for group survival.

This use of comparison allows an examination of why mainstream Christian social conservatism has grown as a visible social movement, and radical lesbian feminism has been restricted to online communities and relatively underground festivals through the analysis of how tradition is structured. It can be safely assumed that Christian social conservatism, having claim to over 200 years of 'Christian America' and having its traditions based largely on the institutions of heterosexual marriage and family (something still understood by the mainstream in the modern

western world as being a positive force), is able to claim legitimacy based on these factors, and thus claim a solid grounding in modern American politics and remain relevant today. Radical feminism, being built upon a traditionalism created for the purpose of competing against the mainstream instead of appealing to it, now finds itself less influential to modern politics. This is due to the lack of any real historical legitimacy of 'womyn's' culture (which was created largely to justify its own rhetoric, rather than on any real historic basis) and the continued criticism of its message by the new, more trans and queer inclusive nature of the LGBT rights movement, and more mainstream forms of feminism.

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