

Article

Wesleyan (Anti)Feminism: A Religious Construction of Gender Equality

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Abstract: Using ethnographic research and interviews, this article explored the construction of gender equality among students and faculty members at the Asbury Theological Seminary. The institution constructed an unusual blend of egalitarianism and anti-feminism using explicitly religious tools. Specifically, it was found that community members constructed firm commitments to gender equality from their heavily individualistic theology and from identification with the New Testament Church. The community's resonance with feminism was also limited by evangelical anti-structuralism and an ethic of Christian humility and moderation. Established constructions of gender equality and inequality in established scholarly, and especially feminist, literature could not fully explain this unusual blend. This paper argues that agency and empowerment can be available to women because of the theological content of their religion.

Keywords: gender; feminism; evangelicalism; Wesleyanism

1. Introduction

Few feminists would expect to find fellow travelers at the Asbury Theological Seminary. Situated in a small town in the borderlands of the American South, Asbury represents a conservative evangelical wing of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. The institution upholds the authority of scripture, emphasizes the spread of the Gospel message throughout the world, encourages a warm piety in its approach to personal spirituality, and has conservative leanings in its social and political commitments. Asbury is unmistakably evangelical.

Yet, Asbury embodies a striking commitment to gender equality. The institution articulates the goal of equipping both men and women for all levels of ministry. This policy is also mirrored in practice. Students are required to write papers using gender-inclusive language. The school's website features photos of men and women interacting with each other on campus and a statement of ethos promising to nurture the equality of the sexes. Moreover, institutional leaders have intentionally placed women in positions of power and influence. They administer communion, teach theology and preaching courses, participate in cabinet meetings, and mentor students. In the fall of 2014, the seminary installed a woman to fill the highly visible position of Dean of the Chapel.

Indeed, Asbury reflects a curious mix of theological and social views. Consider this statement from Blake, a bright young man in his first year of study:

From what I read from scripture and what I read from Jesus, there is no hierarchy or anything. Everyone is equal. And if we introduce something like a feminist organization or ministry in the church, and we take feminism for what it means politically and in our culture, then it's going to elevate that specific gender in the church.

On one hand, Blake seems to be articulating a classic formulation of liberal feminism. He clearly denounces hierarchy and affirms equal rights for men and women. On the other hand, he explicitly

rejects the feminist movement, which he sees as elevating women at men's expense. This convergence of sentiments sounds strange—even inconsistent—to those who assume contemporary categories.

To explore this apparent paradox of anti-feminism and egalitarianism, data were collected during the 2013–14 academic year from ethnographic research and interviews with students and faculty members at the seminary. The ethnographic data were drawn from observations in classrooms, chapel services, and public spaces. The interview sample included 33 students (19 men and 14 women) as well as five faculty and administrators. The primary student sample was obtained through random sampling of all full-time residential students enrolled in ministerial or theological training programs. The sample was limited to American citizens who were in either their first or third years of study and were under the age of 50. In addition to this primary sample, an oversample of women obtained through convenience rather than random sampling procedures was included in order to incorporate the voices and experiences of women in a variety of departments and programs. Faculty or administrators included in the sample were identified by either students or other faculty as having some interest or stake in the school's perspective on gender. Drawing from Dorothy Smith's "institutional ethnography" approach, the inquiry began with the voices and experiences of the students, prioritizing the actors themselves, and the cultural tools they used to interpret the gendered realities of their community (Smith 1987; Swidler 1986). In keeping with Smith's approach, I explored the ways in which student experience interacted with the structure of organization and power within the institution.

Feminist ideas about the sources of women's empowerment have varied widely. Some have called for attention to deep-seated cultural beliefs (Ridgeway 2011) or to the relational interactions where these beliefs play out (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Deutsch 2007). Others have situated gender in terms of broad social (Risman 2004) or economic (Hartman 1981) structures. Still, others have called for the deconstruction of the structural categories of gender itself (Lorber 1993; Rubin 1975). Despite this variation, the most well-developed body of scholarly literature that explores women's empowerment has tended either to ignore religion or to situate it as a source of oppression. Smith's feminist methodological approach, however, requires attention to women's everyday experiences. For religious women, these everyday experiences—whether empowering or disempowering—are profoundly *religious*.

To be sure, the relationship between religion and women's empowerment is complicated. Literature reflecting what some call the "postsecular turn" in feminist scholarship has revealed the complexity of women's lives within conservative religious communities (Bradotti 2008). These women often experience a messy combination of oppression and opportunities for agency and empowerment. The very real empowerment that this literature revealed, however, is most often narrated as tangential to official doctrine and practice. It is often situated in the private, domestic realm (Orsi 1985; Burdick 1996) or otherwise as external to official public ecclesiastical structures (Griffith 1997; Nason-Clark 1997). Scholarship examining American evangelicalism in particular has tended to regard women's empowerment as a cultural adaptation rather than as a religious impulse (Gallagher 2003; Wilcox 2004). Across this body of literature, religion most often appears as a confining, disempowering force even as it tangentially offers tools for agency and liberation.

However, religion is not always best understood as a source of oppression. Martin (2001) points out the oversights that can result from unnecessarily limited ideological constructions. She explores the consequences of feminist sociology's failure to identify the widespread women's empowerment that Pentecostal Christianity brought to Latin America. This omission from feminist dialogue obscures important connections between religious and feminist movements, connections that could be used to facilitate more robust explorations of women's empowerment.

Like Latin American Pentecostalism, Asbury's egalitarianism defies feminist categories. Liberal feminism problematized gender difference and worked to minimize the differences between men and women. Nevertheless, Asbury remains firmly committed to the notion of essential and important differences between men and women. Radical feminists have argued that the problem

was not difference, but patriarchy. However, Asbury struggles to identify structural realities, let alone critique them, as the second part of this article will demonstrate. In short, established feminist narratives cannot fully explain Asbury's blend of anti-feminism and egalitarianism.

Given its public commitment to egalitarianism, Asbury also stands apart from the narrative of many conservative religious communities. The dominant gender impulse of the community is to empower and equip women to serve in all offices and capacities alongside men. I observed very intentional efforts toward gender equality in chapel services, classrooms, and the public rhythms of everyday campus life. Women at Asbury expect to find agency not only in private, domestic realms, but in the very public sphere of church leadership and structure. And yet, as I spoke with community members in interviews, I realized that they understood these efforts not in terms of cultural or political commitments, but rather as religious imperatives which simultaneously alienated them from feminist identity and rhetoric. I argue, then, that Asbury constructs this unusual blend of egalitarianism and anti-feminism with explicitly religious tools. Specifically, I found that women's empowerment was derived from heavily individualistic theology and identification with the New Testament Church. The community's resonance with feminism was also limited by evangelical anti-structuralism and an ethic of Christian humility and moderation.

2. Religious Egalitarianism

Women come to Asbury hoping to find relational and institutional support for their ambitions to become pastors, administrators, and even bishops. Within the student body of roughly 1600 students, approximately 35% are women. Some of these women come from religious contexts that, like Asbury, prioritize gender equality in church leadership structures. Others come out of more conservative evangelical traditions where religious leadership is strictly a male domain. In both cases, women are acutely aware that Asbury's egalitarian stance separates it from other evangelical groups. The empowerment available to them is a visible part of the community's public mission. It is articulated in statements of ethos, taught in classrooms, and embodied every time one of the institution's female faculty members preaches a sermon, officiates communion, and makes an administrative decision. This egalitarianism is derived from biblically based notions of individual value, theological resonance with the New Testament Church, and historic Wesleyan social optimism.

2.1. Theological Individualism

Asbury students voice their conviction for egalitarianism most eagerly using biblical rationale. Like most evangelicals, these students take the biblical texts very seriously. They especially prioritize the Great Commission, which is the call given to all believers in the Gospel of Matthew, to spread their faith throughout the world. This emphasis shows up in a clear and visible commitment to international mission and to the global church. In order to accomplish the goal of spreading the gospel throughout the world, Wesleyans, both historical and contemporary, feel obligated to marshal every resource at their disposal including their sisters and daughters.

Students also trace their support of gender equality back to the Genesis creation account. According to this passage, women, like men, were created in God's own image. Individuals' possession of this image, the *imago Dei*, is the basis for a strikingly individualistic theology. One student, Paul, explained that a woman must not be denied leadership positions simply because she is a woman. She should be given the same rights and opportunities as a man simply because she is human and, therefore, made in God's image.

When we do things where we judge based on gender or social or racial issues, we're devaluing something about the way a person is made—and that person is made in the image of God.

This conviction is as practical as it is theological. I asked interviewees if women and men should assume different roles in the Church. Like most of his fellow students, Ethan answered immediately

with a firm, “No.” When I pressed with the question, “Not at all?” he shook his head. “However God has gifted you,” he said, “is where you should be led and where you should serve.” Asbury’s most heartfelt and robust rhetoric in favor of gender equality contends that decisions about who should lead do not lie in the hands of men and women or organizational authorities. They belong to the Holy Spirit. Just as every human being shares in the *imago Dei* and is offered the gifts of salvation and discipleship in Jesus, every believer—male and female alike—has unfettered access to the Holy Spirit who equips them with gifts and abilities. Belief in this Holy Spirit and its work in individual lives has been an important component in the historical elevation of individual women to positions of church leadership. It framed the actions of the black Baptist women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Butler 2007) and emboldened holiness women preachers during the same era (Stanley 2002). The calling of the Holy Spirit is likewise paramount for Wesleyans at Asbury.

This Spirit, students believe, continues to take residence within the people of God, entreating each Christian to holiness and instilling within them gifts for preaching, teaching, and leadership. As John, an eager first-year student argues, its authority is not to be questioned:

I think that Scripture affirms that both men and women can be pastors, in all capacities, depending upon their gifts and their graces. And if a woman has truly experienced a call to ministry, and you have seen fruit in their life that they have the gift to preach, or the gift to lead others or disciple, etc. Then who am I to say no to them?

Paul articulates similar sentiments, again emphasizing the work of the Spirit in the lives of individuals:

Any ministerial or pastoral role, anything within the Church, which a person is gifted to do, they should be able to do that. Regardless of gender. So, if a woman is clearly gifted with preaching and they feel called to preach, then why should gender matter? If they’re clearly effective in winning people for Christ as an evangelist, why should we hamper what the Spirit has done in that person’s life? Because it not only hampers the work of God—it hinders the work of the Spirit in the world—but it also is devaluing to that person. It’s just wrong.

As Paul suggests, this emphasis on the Holy Spirit expands gender equality beyond a theological truth into a moral imperative. It is *wrong* to hinder the Spirit’s work. In fact, even the few students I met who questioned Asbury’s egalitarian stance spoke with respect and admiration of the women who teach and lead within the seminary community. Their ministries are evidence of the Spirit, and the Spirit is not to be questioned.

2.2. New Testament Identity

Asbury prioritizes not only the Holy Spirit itself, but also the historic community that first received this Spirit. Students revere the story of the burgeoning New Testament church as if it were their own family history. In many ways, it is. Contemporary Wesleyans view the churches of the New Testament as their spiritual ancestors who, like themselves, navigated real-world problems with the help of the Holy Spirit. Asbury students pay careful attention to every detail of the pages of their New Testaments. As the Apostle Paul gently guided the young congregations in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome through internal strife and difficult cultural questions, students eagerly eavesdrop on their correspondence. They believe that the principles contained in these letters apply to twenty-first century Kentucky as much as they did to first-century Rome. So, when Paul wrote to the church in Galatia that there is no longer “male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” they take note.

Students eagerly retold the stories they learned in their New Testament classrooms. Women like Priscilla, Junia, and Phoebe, they said excitedly, aided the growth of the infant church in ways that were liberating for their times. Paul and other New Testament leaders, they implied, recognized the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in these women and accordingly placed them in positions of authority for the sake of “the Kingdom.” It is this same Kingdom that Asbury students pursue. It connects

the seminary community in a theological and historical sense with the New Testament churches of Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. In framing their identities in terms of continuity with the New Testament Church, these contemporary actors heighten the salience of New Testament texts—and their elevation of women—to their everyday lives.

Students also take careful note of New Testament language that appears to prohibit women from church leadership. Many brought up passages from Paul's epistles in their interviews, eager to illustrate that proper exegesis reveals the apostle to be not a misogynist, but a great advocate for women. I asked Josh, a third-year Ph.D. student who had just articulated a detailed and impassioned defense for women in church leadership, how he understood the verses that seemed to preclude this practice. He smiled comfortably, clearly enjoying himself. "Context, context, context," he said slowly, leaning back in his chair for emphasis. "All of Paul's letters are *occasional* letters." For Josh and his colleagues, "context" is more than a word. It is a mantra. Far more than a reflection of internal cognition, it is, as Wuthnow (2011) suggests, a tool used to make sense of the world. In utilizing this particular tool, Josh is actively doing cultural and theological work, framing the words of the Bible in a particular way and comparing that time and place with his own. This process would be impossible without context as a discursive tool.

These theological commitments cannot be understood in isolation. Wesleyans are optimistic and pragmatic people. Historically, they have prioritized orthopraxy (right living) alongside orthodoxy (right belief). This emphasis on orthopraxy is evidenced by a long history of involvement in women's suffrage, poverty programs, the civil rights movement, and the development of substance abuse recovery programs. In fact, Wesleyan Methodism factored heavily in the motivations and organization of the women's rights crusades of the nineteenth century. Contemporary students and faculty continue to believe that the good news of the gospel in the hands of the faithful will bring about positive social change. They see their sisters as well as their brothers as valuable assets to the Church's mission in the world and see no reason to limit the role any individual plays beyond the calling of the Holy Spirit.

Like liberal feminism, then, Asbury concentrates its attentions on the equality of women and men. Furthermore, like liberal feminism, the community's approach to this goal focuses heavily on the public (in this case, churchly) realm. The two groups even share the language of equality. When asked specifically about their feelings toward feminism, in fact, some students articulated a degree of support. A few mentioned women's right to vote, for example, as a positive contribution from the movement. Indeed, the commitments of these students seemed strongly congruent with feminism.

3. Anti-Feminism

Positive comments about feminism, however, were nearly always followed by quick and emphatic qualifications. In fact, most students expressed suspicion, even overt hostility, to feminism in its various forms. Like the community's egalitarianism, Asbury's anti-feminist sentiment is clearly constructed from religious tools. First, the very same religious individualism that animates Asbury's egalitarianism also drives a pervasive anti-structuralism that alienates students from feminism's emphasis on women as a collective rather than simply as individuals. Second, Asbury's emphasis on the Christian ethics of humility and moderation renders feminist language and activism as inappropriately selfish. Finally, community members worried that feminism would distract from their religious mission, even as they emphasized gender equality as a part of this mission. Ironically, students often articulated these objections in their arguments *for* the empowerment of women. They rejected feminist tools as a threat to their own construction of gender equality.

3.1. Anti-Structuralism

Asbury's Christian individualism balances strong anti-structural sentiment. Just as white evangelicals have often preferred to be "colorblind," that is, leaving structures of racial inequality unexamined in favor of individualistic, relational solutions to racism, Asbury prefers its egalitarianism

to be gender-blind (Emerson and Smith 2001). It wishes to empower individual women without reckoning with the structural realities that disempower women as a group. Not surprisingly, Asbury's American student population (from which the interview sample was drawn) remains not only heavily male, but also overwhelmingly white. A first-year student named Pete expressed both individualism and anti-structuralism, applying them to both race and gender. He demonstrates the difficulty that Asbury students have in identifying the structural inequalities that disadvantage groups as well as individuals:

There are so many limitations, now, to keep me from doing a lot of things. I love all the scholarships that are out there for people who are minorities, but I get annoyed when you have to be a minority to even get a scholarship. And there are a lot of minorities who get into a lot of the programs and schools that I'm probably smarter than, and I get upset with things like that. You're giving them preference just because of their skin color. Why can't we be just be color blind? Why can't we be gender blind? I wish everything was done blind . . . it's a community of believers, it is not men over children, it is not men over women. It is a community of believers all on a journey toward salvation.

Like Pete, Chad cannot conceive of a feminism that advocates for a particular group (women) without working against those who fall outside that group (men). Chad worries that this kind of activism might damage the gender-blind equality he and his colleagues are so committed to.

Maybe (in feminism) there was an overcompensation for feeling unequal . . . that could really damage the idea that there is a place for women in the kingdom and it's very much equal to that of men . . . I'm just afraid that feminism may, you know, push the idea that women are somehow better than men or that men have been better for too long. I just think it can get messy . . . It might work against the actual, you know, equality.

Another student, Hannah, illustrates the discomfort students feel with structural activism and how easily they revert to individualistic approaches:

What I'm scared of is people taking it way far and being very militant. You know, "we have to make sure on all bases that women are completely included no matter what." I want women to be included, but I don't know . . . To tell a little girl who's four years old, you know, whatever God calls you to, whatever God has gifted you to, I want you to be able to fulfill that—and that's not just as a wife and mother but that's as a human being, as a woman. I would call that godly feminism . . . but going to an extreme of, 'We wanna make sure men are in their place' . . . I feel like it becomes exploitative again. That's where I feel that it becomes too much.

The underlying individualistic assumptions behind this might be rooted in theological understandings, but they also color the ways that students engage the contemporary world. I asked students several questions about "feminism". Many of them, however, framed their answers in terms not of feminism as a movement, but in terms of "feminists" as individual people. They did not know much about feminism as a movement, but they knew what they disliked about feminists.

This reluctance to work with structural categories is, to be sure, a serious limitation for Asbury's egalitarianism. However, just because the community's egalitarianism is limited, it does not mean that it is ineffectual. Students like Hannah who came to Asbury from a more conservative Christian tradition hold fiercely to the community's commitment to women's empowerment. They are so committed, in fact, that they fear that engaging structures, as feminism does, might actually work against their vision of individualistic equality.

3.2. Christian Ethics

Asbury's identity is based on more than theology. The seminary is a living, breathing community with a strong, if implicit, ethical code. A page on the school's website suggests how seriously the community takes these ethics:

With God's help we will exercise the freedom of joyful obedience in being faithful stewards of our minds, bodies, time, gifts, abilities, possessions, and finances as expressions of God's good creation. We will renounce those attitudes and actions that resist the work of the Spirit, divide Christian community, and impede human flourishing.

The statement reflects both the community's individualism (i.e., its commitment to human flourishing and the work of the Holy Spirit) and the ethic of Christian unity (i.e., "Christian community"). According to students, feminism is not only a diversion from individualistic equality, but can actively damage the foundations of that equality by working against the values of Christian humility and moderation.

Over and over, students described feminism as "extreme" or "radical." They were not being complimentary. Evangelical culture—at Asbury and beyond—rewards personal humility, moderation, and selflessness. Students' assumptions that feminism encourages selfish ambition and divisive self-advocacy further alienated them from the movement. Jeff framed his rejection of feminism in terms of obedience to God. To advocate for one's own interests, he suggests, can signal rebellion:

I'm fully in agreement with bringing women to the equal position of men, but when you become radical in a way that is rebellious to the church that you're in and you start caring about your personal agenda and your personal beliefs above and beyond the authority of those who are above you, then you become rebellious. You become disobedient to the authority that God's placed above you

Josh, a third-year student who was particularly emphatic in his support for women's full inclusion in church leadership, similarly explained that advocating for one group, women, for example, or racial minorities, creates division within Christian community:

I mean there's extreme feminism, and I think that's really damaging, and it's not really helpful. To see men as the devil or, you know, kind of like with African Americans, white men as the devil . . . I'm just not a big fan of extremes. I think it's damaging in the sense that it really puts the perspective into an either/or. Either men or women rather than a both/and.

Again, Josh's objections recall his egalitarian commitments. Everyone must be free to answer the Holy Spirit's calling and work together. Of course, this anti-structuralism makes it impossible for students like Josh to consider the very real possibility of structural disempowerment even within their campus community.

Notably, both Josh and Jeff are men. Indeed, Asbury's men particularly rebuked feminism's perceived excesses. However, female students also leveled harsh critiques against feminism using similar logic. Some of these women also felt the need to clarify their own separation from feminism in order to justify their churchly ambitions. Phoebe, for example, feared that being perceived as a feminist would bring her commitment to the ethics of the community into question:

I mean we don't want to talk about it too much to where there is a glaring difference between how we should treat men and women. Of course we don't want to come off as like feminist, like that kind of thing.

Hannah, likewise, understood her own ambition to be completely separate from feminist impulses. She explained, "It's not like I'm a raving feminist anyway. I mean, I just wanna have an opportunity to do what God calls me to do, you know?" For Hannah and for Phoebe, alignment with feminism

would mean setting themselves apart from the community's ethics, thus making it difficult—or even impossible—for them to exercise any kind of leadership in the Church.

However, Asbury's women also indirectly demonstrate the importance of feminist language. Even as they reject feminism, these women display evidence of the systemic inequalities that feminism addresses. They feel pressure to speak in certain ways, to exhibit their femininity in certain ways. They worry that churches will not want to hire them if they have children. They worry that churches will not want to hire them if they remain single. They are also spread thin by what sociologist Hochschild (2003) calls the "Second Shift". Asbury's women carry not only the weight of their studies. They also typically oversee the domestic labor of cooking and cleaning, children's activities, and family scheduling. All of these experiences set them apart from their male colleagues. Yet in rejecting feminism, these women also alienate themselves from potentially helpful discursive tools. That is, feminism helps explain their experiences in terms of patriarchy, androcentrism, and women's standpoint. Without these tools, Asbury's women often fail to recognize these realities. They largely struggle alone, not realizing that their experiences are a part of larger, systemic patterns. Asbury's community ethics might be intended to facilitate egalitarian unity, but they also make it difficult for women like Phoebe and Hannah to reach their full potential.

3.3. Feminism as a Distraction

Asbury students see feminism not only as a deviation from Christian ethics, but also as a pernicious distraction. Almost without exception, the students interviewed spoke about feminism as if it were a completely secular ideology, unrelated to their work in the church. They knew very little about the various forms and impulses of feminism, even the Christian impulses out of which the movement was birthed in nineteenth-century America (Dayton 1976; Hassey 1986). While they articulated varying degrees of discomfort with it, feminism was simply not something that they could be bothered to learn much about. This suggests that they were too focused on churchly concerns (including the individualistic construction of gender equality described above) to pay much attention to non-religious ideologies like feminism. Even those who seemed most friendly to feminist ideas appeared to feel no inclination or responsibility to engage them in thoughtful ways.

Even women like Nadia, whose life experiences had caused her to appreciate society's need for feminism, argued that the Church's tools are *better*.

R: I think (feminists) have gone to the extreme.

I: Mm, and that's not helpful for the Church?

R: No. Not in my estimation.

I: Do you think that the Church has other tools that can empower women in more positive ways?

R: The Bible! They don't need any other tools! All of us are called. Each one of us is the Christian that the Bible is talking about. The people of God. And so we are each called to align our lives with the will of God for what God created us to be and do.

Alison likewise situated feminism in competition with faith:

Feminism seemed to put women above God. And the whole point, it seemed like, was about a gender, rather than all of us striving to be more Christ-like. And, so, it took the focus off of Christ, and made it more about gender.

Even the grammatical construction of Alison's sentences distances her from feminism. By using the past tense, she separates herself and her faith from its principles. Perhaps she had considered feminism in the past. Perhaps there was a moment when the Church and feminism could have converged. Nevertheless, for Alison at least, that moment has past.

4. The Ironies of Wesleyan Anti-Feminist Egalitarianism

Understanding the religious commitments of these Wesleyan evangelicals helps to illuminate how they can be simultaneously egalitarian and anti-feminist. Theirs is a unique construction, motivated by the content of their faith. This combination also provides some striking ironies.

One of the greatest ironies of this formulation of egalitarian anti-feminism is that many of the original feminists in nineteenth-century America *were* Christian. Indeed, many were Wesleyan. The impulses of this early feminism began with Christian women who understood the Bible to teach equality between the sexes (Dayton 1976). Women like Lucretia Mott and Sarah Grimke fought bitter battles for their own rights to education and religious agency. For these historic women, feminist activism was not an external construct in competition with their faith, it was the logical outgrowth of their religious commitments. For contemporary Asbury students, in contrast, the ministry of women is simply a part of their heritage. It's the way they do church—and always have. It is not radical. It is not activist. It is not feminist.

A second irony lies in the stories of the individual women who are a part of Asbury's community. Much as evangelical individualism and anti-structuralism constrain evangelical responses to racism, they also place stark limitations on the individual women Asbury wants to empower. Beyond their alienation from potentially empowering feminist language, the women of the community shared with me their unsettling experiences of being a woman in a churchly world that has largely been dominated by men. They were delighted to be on Asbury's egalitarian campus, they told me, but still felt inhibited, out of place, and alone with their struggles. The promise of Asbury's individualistic egalitarianism is crippled by its anti-structuralism.

Finally, the feminism that Asbury students hold at arm's length is a caricature. In the Asbury students' reductionist understanding, feminism is incompatible with true equality and a harmonious existence of individual men and women in a Christian community. There are two values implicit in this construction. First is an objective of peaceful, equitable community life. Second is an implicit understanding that women are, in fact, different from men and that this difference is somehow important to the community. Herein lies a third irony. These values reflect important impulses within contemporary feminist thought. The lack of attention to women's perspectives and experiences as women is a critique that standpoint feminists have leveled at both liberal feminism and at broader society. Scholars like Dorothy Smith, along with Patricia Hill Collins and others, advocate the development of women's standpoint. The intent is not to "take men down", as Asbury students assumed, but to advocate for holistic, healthy communities and human flourishing. Holding to a very particular definition of feminism, these Wesleyan evangelicals think of themselves as anti-feminists because they are simultaneously devoted to two of the most important feminist ideals of our time.

5. Conclusions

Asbury's egalitarian impulse, then, mirrors secular feminism in a number of ways, perhaps a reflection of the religious roots of secular feminism itself. It simultaneously challenges secular feminism using distinctly religious tools deriving from a Wesleyan framework of religious practice and theology. While Asbury's egalitarianism certainly demonstrates resonance with secular feminism, it is not this resonance that motivates its perpetuation. Students do not use feminist tools. They do not claim feminist identity. And yet Asbury's egalitarianism persists. It is not a collection of secular ideas clothed in religious terminology. Instead, it is best understood as a religious construction of women's empowerment.

These Wesleyan egalitarians, then, complicate the sociological literature of evangelicalism and gender. While scholars of American religion have long acknowledged the variety within the evangelical tradition, implications of this variety for gender belief and practice have remained largely unexamined. The predominant assumption is that some version of "soft patriarchy" explains the entirety of evangelicalism's approach to gender in both the public and private spheres (Wilcox 2004).

Asbury reflects a long-established evangelical tradition that not only practices egalitarian church leadership, but fiercely defends it as a religious construct.

At its basis, Asbury reminds us that the spectrum of feminism is wide. Indeed, Asbury's variety of "feminism" does not trace its roots to Betty Friedan. Instead, it reaches back to Wesleyan origins in the nineteenth century. It would, in fact, be unintelligible to the people who practice it without the tools of theology and religious devotion. Perhaps this story demands a larger reframing of current conceptual tools in feminist theories. For Wesleyans, the ministry of women is not a new, progressive ideal, nor is it a capitulation to secular culture. It is simply a part of their heritage. It is the way they do church and always have.

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