

# BOOK REVIEWS

## EVANGELICAL FEMINISM

by Nadean Bishop

Pamela D.H. Cochran, *EVANGELICAL FEMINISM: A HISTORY*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2005. 243p., notes. bibl. index. pap., \$19.00, ISBN 0-8147-1650-4.

Nicola Hoggard Creegan & Christine D. Pohl, *LIVING ON THE BOUNDARIES: EVANGELICAL WOMEN, FEMINISM AND THE THEOLOGICAL ACADEMY*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005. 203p. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$18.00, ISBN 0-8308-2665-3.

As the 2006 mid-term elections drew near, major news magazines and journals attempted to clarify who the thirty percent of the electorate who described themselves as “evangelicals” actually were. Some tied them to “fundamentalism,” while others claimed that “evangelical” is a label for a conglomerate of many disparate groups.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, one of the founders of the Evangelical Women’s Caucus, emphasizes that “[e]vangelicals come in a continuum that runs the political gamut from extreme left to extreme right. What Christian evangelicals have in common is the conviction that meaningful living requires a direct personal relationship with God, and that the Bible should be taken seriously. But what that means can differ widely, and our social attitudes differ tremendously” (“Feminism and Evangelicalism,” in *EEWC Update*, v.29, no.1, Spring (April-June) 2005; online at <http://www.eewc.com/Update/Spring2005Feminism.htm>). The array of social issues on which evangelical attitudes differ includes feminism.

Having grown up a devout Southern Baptist and, years later, becoming the first “out” lesbian minister of an American Baptist church after 22 years as a professor of women’s studies, I can understand the tensions felt by women who are trying to bridge the gap that can exist between the concepts “feminist” and “evangelical.” No wonder the back-cover reviews of Pamela Cochran’s history of evangelical feminism are sprinkled with conflict words like “tortuous journey” and “struggled heroically.” And no wonder a quarter of those interviewed and polled in the Creegan and Pohl volume, *Living on the Boundaries*, have left their evangelical roots.

Women’s studies professors today, who may have young evangelicals in their classes even if they are not aware of it, might benefit (as might their students) from reading these two volumes written by women living and working “on the boundaries.”

Pamela D.H. Cochran’s *Evangelical Feminism* is a meticulous history of two influential organizations,

the Evangelical Women’s Caucus (EWC) and Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), here described as representing the “progressive” and “traditionalist” ends of the evangelical feminist spectrum.

The chapters follow a chronology during the early years of Biblical Feminism (1973–1975), the growth of the movement (1975–1984), until the “explosion of diversity among evangelical feminists” (1984–1986) “precipitated by the issue of homosexuality in the EWC” (p.10). Subsequent chapters analyze “the two distinct biblical feminist theologies,” their treatment of significant scriptural passages, and the consequences from the time of the split of the two groups in 1986 until the year 2000.

The journal *Daughters of Sarah* provided a clearinghouse for responses to the 1973 “Chicago Declaration” calling “both men and women to mutual submission and active discipleship” (p.14). In 1974 Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty published *All We’re Meant to Be* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974), which re-

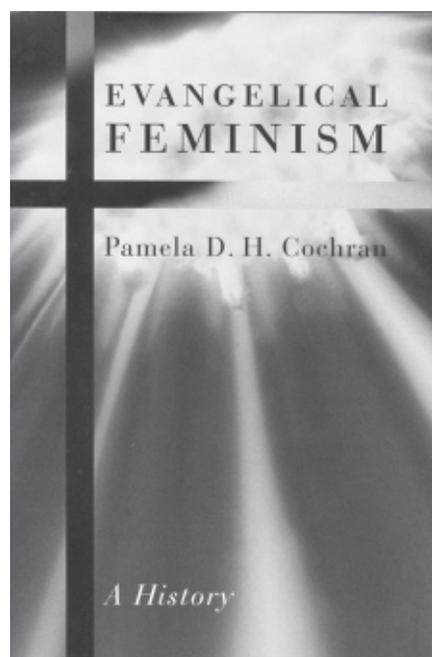
examined the Genesis accounts of Creation, Paul's challenges to women's leadership, and other "problem passages" and declared them to be "situationally conditioned." In social practice, as well, they advocate reproductive choice and "shared parenting and egalitarian marriages," and even leave open the possibility of lesbianism. "It was the increasing acceptance of new hermeneutical methods and a limited definition of inerrancy that enabled biblical feminism to convince a growing number of evangelicals over the next ten years that their movement was indeed, 'biblical'" (p.30).

Virginia Mollenkott keynoted the first gathering of the EWC on Thanksgiving of 1975 (after its founding a year earlier), and the group of 360 sent telegrams supporting the ERA and affirming their solidarity with the Catholic women who were meeting in Detroit to discuss women's ordination. Attendance grew to 1,000 for the meeting in 1978 at Fuller Seminary.

Pat Gundry's religious denomination sanctioned her, even though she was one of the more conservative feminists of the time, over her 1977 book *Woman Be Free!*, and her husband was asked to resign his position at Moody Bible Institute. Virginia Mollenkott, a representative of the "liberal" evangelical feminists, left her position at Nyack Missionary College after deciding her seventeen-year marriage must end in divorce, and thereafter taught at William Paterson College in New Jersey. Her book *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1977) set out her hermeneutics about the Trinity, Creation, the In-

carnation, and equality in some "future perfection."

Mollenkott worked with the National Council of Churches to shape an inclusive language lectionary, which most evangelicals rejected. Her co-authorship of the book *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978) with Letha Scanzoni precipitated the eventual fracture of the Evangelical



Women's Caucus and the formation of an alternative and more "traditionalist" group, Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE). The chapter on this fracas gives a minute analysis of who said what to whom over the next several years before the meeting in February 1987 in Minneapolis during which CBE took form.

Evangelical responses to the Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis in 1993 take up a large part of the next chapter, which does a comprehensive discussion of theories of

gender, Biblical authority, the Wisdom figure Sophia, and the substitutionary theory of the atonement. "Spurred by a criticism from the lesbian theologian Carter Heyward that her Christology was too exclusive," Mollenkott responded by embracing a "Universalist Christology," so as not to exclude "Muslim, Jewish, and post-Christian and post-Judaic feminist women" (p.121).

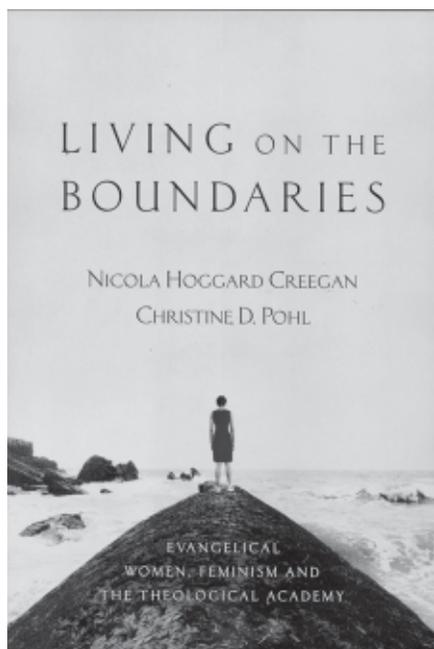
As the Evangelical Women's Caucus (later renamed the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus, or EEWC) became more liberal, it lost influence among male evangelicals. "As a result," Cochran claims, "evangelical theologians no longer bother to discourse publicly with Mollenkott or other feminists in the EEWC. These women are regarded as too extreme to be a threat to traditional evangelical social or theological norms" (p.188).

In describing the organizational changes from 1986 to the present, Cochran uses the Willow Creek Association and its founder Bill Hybels to demonstrate the "decentralized, fragmented, populist nature of contemporary American evangelicalism." She cites the irony that members of those conservative groups that most "base their identity on the concept of transcendent authority and have fought against American individualism and pluralism" have become the largest participants in these new interdenominational structures (p.193).

She concludes by saying, "What is more, the story of evangelical feminism suggests that evangelicalism may have inadvertently contributed to the loss of its own dominance in contemporary American society...by fitting into it so well" (p.194).

Cochran is brilliant in the ease with which she summarizes difficult theological concepts and tangled Biblical criticism. Using archival sources and interviews with leaders in these groups as well as hundreds of books and articles (carefully annotated in eighteen pages of notes and eight pages of bibliography), Cochran has written a foundational work that should be of interest to women's studies professors and librarians, especially those in religious schools and seminaries. The fact that most of her sources are in the 1970s and 1980s may reflect the fact that she is largely limited to those decades in her history, but could also mean that her research was completed some years before the book's publication in 2005.

Whereas *Evangelical Feminism* is a scholarly academic history, *Living on the Boundaries* is written from the authors' own experiences and



beliefs, augmented with stories and generalizations drawn from a questionnaire returned by eighty-nine “academic women in the fields of theology, biblical studies, church history, ethics and missions who identify or once identified themselves as evangelicals” (p.22). Sixty-six were self-identified as evangelical or neo-evangelical and described themselves as Wesleyan, Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian, Church of God, Anabaptist or Southern Baptist. Seventeen of the women said they were not presently evangelical. One-third of the women surveyed were ordained or licensed ministers, and nearly twenty percent had overseas mission experience (p.25). Fifty-six had doctorates and another thirty lacked only their dissertation.

Following receipt of their narrative online answers to questionnaires, twenty-five participants were interviewed face-to-face at meetings of the American Academy of Religion. The sampling of eighty-nine women included twenty-five who were single, eleven married with no children, six divorced, and forty-two married with children. Half the women had children (p.26). I would have appreciated seeing a copy of the questionnaire in an appendix, but it is not included.

Once you get used to the evangelical use of language, this book is extremely readable, with theoretical portions leavened by quotes from respondents. They include dozens of statements from those who have rejected the evangelical mold, such as this one: “I do not believe many of the beliefs that I once thought were firm, i.e. the inerrancy of Scripture, the God-written nature of Scripture,

the God-given role of submission of women to men, that God can be influenced by prayer in ways that contradict nature (healing of spinal cord injuries), that God leads and directs our lives in highly specific ways (marriage partners, protecting from accidents). Even within the faith my beliefs have changed, (have) become less magical” (p.33).

The authors do a nice job of surveying the literature about gender by evangelical authors, but begin this discussion with a quote from one of those surveyed: “Someone once asked me if there was a split within evangelicalism over the role of women. I replied that there couldn't really be a split because the issue was not even on the agenda” (p.60). Women in congregations manage to “carve out for themselves, within the divided sacred canopy, a space with considerable power and influence,” but this is often done in a secret, even “subversive” way (p.62).

Surprisingly little is said about the overtly feminist 1993 global Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis (where I led a workshop), which attracted 2000 women and became the biggest religious news story of the year, except this complaint: “And when the more extreme feminist stances get the headlines — Sophia, goddess worship and women-church — this sets the entire discussion back for evangelical women. Conservative men then feel justified in fearing that when women get into positions of leadership and responsibility, the church is on the slippery slope to idolatry and disorder” (p.92).

In a section entitled “Sociomoral Issues as Litmus Tests,” it is asserted that it is hard to hold views not op-

posing homosexuality and abortion and still “be defined as a member in good standing” (p.67). Intense suspicions are also held against anyone opposed to “male headship” and the playing out of divinely ordained separate roles.

Family responsibilities create greater stresses than in other cultures, because, as one respondent wrote, “[i]n sermons, in evangelical publications, in Christian bookstores and certainly on the airwaves, the message comes through that a woman’s highest callings are to build up a man and to raise children, which translates into staying at home with the kids... Even some of the prominent women in evangelical circles who have active public ministries lambaste that very activity” (p.110).

The second half of the book deals with valuable insights and recommendations for women teaching within evangelical colleges and seminaries. Many of these are helpful for any woman academic: build a support system outside your work setting, select a mentor within the structure who can provide protection when attacks come, create small groups for prayer and encouragement, and keep mentoring students to form the next generation of leaders, even when some students challenge their leadership (p.180). “Parachurch organizations,” such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Young Life, Campus Crusade, L’Abri, and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, have provided security and support for some academic evangelical women (p.123).

Recognition is given to the difficulty faced when very few women

are on the faculty: “When female presence is very limited, it can be exhausting for those women. Being tokens or pioneers is difficult; in such contexts women find themselves alternately invisible and a bit of a spectacle” (p.182).

When feminist principles lead to a change in pedagogical style, women professors in evangelical schools that value authority sometimes face criticism: “I have received evaluations that devalued my teaching role, stating that I was too nurturing in class, my lectures were not authoritative enough, and I cared too much for class discussion and practical applications...Is this backlash?” (p.88)

Carol Gilligan’s landmark study on women’s nurturance is critiqued, with the complaint that it “can sometimes lead to a heightened differentiation of men’s and women’s roles and gifts, especially if taken uncritically or out of context.” One respondent “noted that Gilligan’s work had been used to reinforce the nurturing role of women so much so that they become seen as ‘mothers’ in the church rather than as ‘partners in ministry.’ The result of ‘genderizing gifts, talents... or communication and leadership styles’ is a truncated vision of what God can do through people” (p.97).

“The evangelical tendency to value group identity while simultaneously maintaining a piety that is highly individualistic may have a distinctive impact on women....But this individualistic approach also obscures the many social and cultural dynamics and structures at work in every community” (p.82).

Living on the boundary between feminism and evangelical teaching is often expressed in a doubleness, as

in this example of the benefits of conflicting positions: “Feminist writings have nurtured women’s power of creativity and fertility, reclaiming women’s power and women’s voice. But the grammar of feminist theology and of feminist theology classes in particular, can appear individualistic and selfish to a woman coming from an evangelical background, even when the material is experienced as empowering at another level” (p.135).

*Living on the Boundaries* is published by an evangelical press, which may explain the constant effort to modulate criticisms and balance positives and negatives for feminism and the often antagonistic evangelical position. For example, in their conclusion the authors strike a hopeful note: “We also want to acknowledge that the space between maps continues to be a very interesting location. We inhabit not just a tense and conflicted space, but one that is theologically rich, full of grace and spiritually demanding. As an increasing number of sociological studies have shown, evangelicalism looks different when seen through the eyes of women, and evangelicalism will change, we believe, as women gain a stronger voice” (pp.175–176).

Yet they also admit that things are getting worse and not better for women academics: We see progress in the evangelical academic world; “simultaneously, however, there is a hardening of positions in a number of schools and denominations.... the split between the church and the academy, if anything, has increased” (p.176).

One notices in both of the books under review that evangelicals quote mostly evangelicals. Though Cochran includes a sprinkling of ideas from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Letty Russell and Carter Heyward, these mainstream feminist theologians are largely overlooked in favor of those more conservative in their leanings.

In both texts, the possibility of “feminists” not being white and middle-class is broached only in a scattering of footnotes as oblique as this one from Cochran: “Non-white, less privileged feminists also complained that white women assumed that all women were the same, that the priority of all women was for

upwardly mobile, equal-opportunity legislation, like equal pay for equal work. Yet women in the lower classes and non-Caucasian women often needed more basic needs addressed. For example, whereas liberal and radical feminists sought the right to control their reproductive lives through access to birth control and abortion on demand, women in poverty wanted access to basic medical services. See Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003)” (pp.205–206).

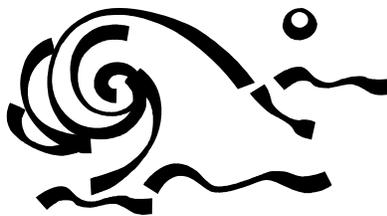
Cochran is wise enough to conclude, “We must pray for God to forgive us our sexist sins, heal our blindness, motivate our hearts, and open our minds. If the women are

absent in biblical and theological studies, we all are missing out on half of the Story” (p.129). No doubt the authors of *Living on the Boundaries* would agree.

[Nadean Bishop taught “*The Bible as Literature*,” “*Feminist Thought*,” and “*Women in World Religions*” during her 25-year tenure at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Ordained in 1985 after graduation from the Pacific School of Religion, she moved to Minneapolis in 1992 to become pastor at the University Baptist Church. Nadean serves on the Council of Christian Lesbians Out (CLOUT) and was for five years the Executive Director of the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.]

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