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# Believing in Women? Examining Early Views of Women among America’s Most Progressive Religious Groups

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**Abstract:** This paper examines views of women among the most prominent “progressive” American religious groups (as defined by those that liberalized early on the issue of birth control, circa 1929). We focus on the years between the first and second waves of the feminist movement (1929–1965) in order to examine these views during a time of relative quiescence. We find that some groups indeed have a history of outspoken support for women’s equality. Using their modern-day names, these groups—the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and to a lesser extent, the Society of Friends, or Quakers—professed strong support for women’s issues, early and often. However, we also find that prominent progressive groups—the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Presbyterian Church—were virtually silent on the issue of women’s rights. Thus, we conclude that birth control activism within the American religious field was not clearly correlated with an overall feminist orientation.

**Keywords:** religion; feminism

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## 1. Introduction

Which American religious groups can truly be characterized as early and staunch feminists? This paper investigates this question by examining the most prominent American religious groups’ views of women between the first and second waves of the feminist movement (1929–1965). It focuses on the eight Christian denominations that liberalized early on birth control.<sup>1</sup>

We analyze these groups between the two main waves of feminism—after suffrage was granted but before the second wave of feminism took off. We do so with the goal of discerning which groups maintained a focus on women’s rights during a time of relative quiescence.

We find that some groups have indeed had a long history of outspoken support for women’s equality. Due to denominational mergers, these groups represent more than half of the eight early liberalizers on birth control. Using their modern-day names, we observe that these groups—the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and to a lesser extent, the Society of Friends, or Quakers—professed strong support for women’s issues, early and often. However, we also find that prominent early liberalizers on birth control—the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Presbyterian Church—were virtually silent on the issue of women’s rights, throughout the entire period. Therefore, we conclude that birth control activism within the American religious field was not clearly correlated with an overall feminist orientation.

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<sup>1</sup> See (Wilde and Danielsen 2014). Wilde and Danielsen (2014) have demonstrated that these groups liberalized because of their concern about race suicide and belief in the social gospel movement.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Complex Religion

Scholars of inequality recognize that inequality intersects with other social structures in complex ways.<sup>2</sup> The argument and analysis throughout this article is deeply influenced by these theories—often referred to as “intersectionality.” While these theories are crucial to the argument developed in this article, it is also true that religion has not typically been a part of intersectional research.<sup>3</sup> Complex religion argues that religion is part and parcel of racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequality. More specifically, theories of complex religion maintain that both research on religion and research on inequality would be enriched by taking those intersections into account more explicitly.<sup>4</sup>

Studies that employ the complex religion approach have largely focused on intersections of religion, race, and class.<sup>5</sup> Given that the denominations in our sample were elite and white (e.g., the “unmarked” category), their similar race and class positions cannot explain their divergent views on women. Thus, we do not include a detailed discussion of class and race, and how it relates to these religious groups (or their views on birth control here).<sup>6</sup> Instead, we investigate and evaluate how these groups were oriented in relation to women’s rights. In doing so, we demonstrate that although these groups are today all a part of either “Mainline Protestantism” or the religious left, their earlier views of women were more varied than many might assume.

A significant amount of research has investigated the relationship between religion and gender inequality. Much of this research examines how women, especially in conservative religious communities, negotiate and navigate their religious lives.<sup>7</sup> These studies variously find that some women are empowered by their religion, some women challenge religious norms through partial or noncompliance<sup>8</sup>, while others strategically utilize religion in pursuit of various needs.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, a number of scholars have examined how women believers “improvise, resist, and continually reshape their own roles and relations” within their faith communities, as well as how theological concepts like “submission,” may be reinterpreted by women believers to be healing, transformative, and even empowering.<sup>10</sup> Other researchers have challenged this approach to the study of women in conservative religious communities; arguing that women may be participating in these communities for religious purposes, as a “mode of conduct and being” and emphasizing that women cannot “do religion” without “doing gender.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the sociological research on religion and gender noted above, a few studies directly examine how denominations institutionalize feminism or women’s rights as we do here. The most relevant part of this literature examines when, how, and why religious groups have extended full clergy rights to women.<sup>12</sup> A key finding is that conflicts revolving around women’s ordination have not been about “wrestling institutional power and resources from men and giving them to women.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, such struggles involve women and men on both sides, who are less concerned with transferring actual power and resources from one gender to another, and more concerned with what institutionalizing women’s ordination signals about their organizational identity. That is, these conflicts are about women and men who “want their denomination to display one sort of organization identity” to the

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<sup>2</sup> See (Collins 2000; McCall 2001, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Many intersectional studies have focused on women of color, see: (McCall 2001; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1983; Espiritu 2007; Glenn 2004; Hooks 2000, 2014; King 1988; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Robnett 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See (Wilde and Glassman 2016; McCall 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See (Wilde).

<sup>6</sup> See (Wilde).

<sup>7</sup> See (Wallace 1975; Rao 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See (Dillon 1999; Katzenstein 1995).

<sup>9</sup> See (Chen 2005; Davidman 1991; Gallagher 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See (Griffith 2000; Wilcox 1990; Ozorak 1996).

<sup>11</sup> See (Avishai 2008).

<sup>12</sup> See (Chang 1997; Charlton 1997; Zikmund et al. 1998; Wallace 1993).

<sup>13</sup> See (Chavez 1997).

outside world.<sup>14</sup> By examining American religious progressives' views of women during a time of relative quiescence around women's rights, we are able to discern which groups were more active promoters of women's rights before those rights became an organizational marker.

### 3. The First and Second Waves of the Feminist Movement

Although the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 is often credited as the birthplace of the first wave of the women's rights movement in the United States, historical accounts indicate that women had been organizing around political and social issues much earlier.<sup>15</sup> Women in the early to mid-19th century often gathered in sewing circles and other church-related functions but some also formed or joined anti-slavery societies. Within these abolitionist circles, women "first won the right to speak in public" and developed their ideas about equality and the position of women in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The insights, skills, and experiences of many women abolitionists were carried into the first wave of feminism, starting in 1840 and continuing through the early 20th century.

While notable leaders of the first wave, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, identified voting as an important objective of the movement, other activists were more concerned with women and girls' access to education, their inability to bear witness or sue in a court of law, employment, and issues of earnings, temperance, and divorce.<sup>17</sup>

Among early women's rights activists, there were a number of divisions, some rooted in the controversy generated by the 15th Amendment and its extension of suffrage to black men over white women, the class privilege of many movement leaders relative to large swaths of women in the United States, and in the strategies and approaches taken by different women leaders. However, it was ultimately differences over the issue of suffrage that preceded and paved the way for other divisions.<sup>18</sup> Some movement leaders, like Susan B. Anthony, were willing to "work with anyone, whatever their views on other matters, as long as they wholeheartedly espoused woman suffrage," while others like Lucy Stone, pursued a more selective, conservative image that would not be mistaken as encouraging divorce or "social evil."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the first wave of the feminist movement included a range of issues, groups, and strategies aimed at improving the welfare and standing of women.

Black women, however, were largely excluded from the first wave of the women's rights movement. In part, the failure to include black women was rooted in the very different living circumstances that white and black women experienced. For instance, black women were denied access to most forms of employment and faced great risk of racialized violence, even in the North, so issues concerning labor unions and suffrage were not of immediate priority for black women or black women activists. Moreover, some women's rights activists, like Alice Paul, were concerned that including black women, on equal footing, would risk "alienating Southern supporters."<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, white, working-class women were the subject of intense focus by women's age-of-consent reformers and suffragists in the late 19th century and early 20th century. In fact, the two rival national suffrage organizations, the American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Woman Suffrage Association, both viewed the campaign for a state-regulated age-of-consent for sexual relations with women to be "an important battle in the larger struggle to overcome the subordination of women in home and society."<sup>21</sup>

By the time the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, industrialization meant that more women, especially unmarried and young white women, were working outside of the home, often in urban

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<sup>14</sup> See (Chavez 1997).

<sup>15</sup> See (Coontz 1992).

<sup>16</sup> See (Flexner 1959).

<sup>17</sup> See (Odem 1985).

<sup>18</sup> See (Griffith 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See (Flexner 1959).

<sup>20</sup> See (Cooke 2008).

<sup>21</sup> See (Odem 1985).

settings. Far from the supervision of their families and immersed in large city life, rather than tight-knit communal and rural life, these women often participated in mixed-sex, commercialized leisurely social activities. Consequently, the movement of unmarried, young women away from home sparked great anxiety and was linked to social problems like family disintegration, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and the spread of venereal disease.

In response, moral campaigns led by middle-class white women reformers emerged with the goal of protecting young, working-class white women. In particular, the reformers wanted to raise the age of consent so that men who engaged in sexual intercourse with women below the designated age of consent would be subject to legal penalties. With support from workingmen's groups, suffragists, and doctors, the reformers relied on a narrative whereby wealthy men preyed upon innocent, poor, white women. In this narrative, the victims would then go on to threaten society with disease and defective offspring.<sup>22</sup> Much like the suffragists, these reformers also excluded black women from their activism. By advancing a campaign which overlooked the sexual exploitation of black women and refrained from condemning the racialized popular conceptions of black men as sexual predators, the reformers eventually garnered the support of southern white women, who were concerned primarily with the protection of white female purity.

As women's political activism continued, they also experienced increased "professional visibility" as they entered more diverse professions and earned advanced degrees.<sup>23</sup> By 1945, demand for women's labor reached new levels with the rise of clerical and sales industries. Having secured the right to vote and access to basic educational and employment opportunities, a second wave of feminists would not surface until the period between 1963 and 1966 and continuing through the early 1970s.

Galvanized by discrimination in the workplace and disparate treatment by "men with whom they worked in the civil rights and antiwar movements," the second-wave of women's rights activists were college-educated women.<sup>24</sup> This time, however, the key issues were bodily integrity and abortion, as well as the social construction of gender. Unlike their predecessors, second-wave women's rights activists largely referred to themselves as "feminists" and envisioned a sisterhood that crossed barriers of age, race, culture, and economics. Nevertheless, this wave also experienced fractures and divisions along race, class and ideology; with some women identifying with liberal feminism and others with radical feminism. Liberal feminists tended to build upon the experiences of mostly educated, white, middle-class women and they critiqued "gendered patterns of socialization," and advocated for increased representation in public institutions.<sup>25</sup> The more radical feminism, which emerged from the anti-war, lesbian and gay, and civil rights movements, tended to focus on "consciousness-raising" while critiquing patriarchy, power, and public institutions.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. The History of American Religion and Feminism

As a major social movement that involved religious women, feminism or the "view that society should be transformed to include the full participation of women" has led American religious communities to "rethink their history, their polity, and their theology."<sup>27</sup> In some cases, the interaction between religion and feminism has been fraught—with women in the US exiting or critiquing traditional religious denominations. Early feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that religious texts privileged men over women and legitimized inequality.<sup>28</sup> As Stanton critiqued religion during this mid-19th century period, other women also began to look for alternatives to traditional religion.

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<sup>22</sup> See (Smith-Rosenberg 1985).

<sup>23</sup> See (Smith-Rosenberg 1985).

<sup>24</sup> See (Coontz 1992).

<sup>25</sup> See (Kroløkke and Sørensen 2005).

<sup>26</sup> See (Kroløkke and Sørensen 2005).

<sup>27</sup> See (Braude 2006).

<sup>28</sup> See (De Groot 2012).

In fact, one key finding by scholars is that both the movement for women's rights and Spiritualism were "intertwined continually" not because all feminists were Spiritualists but because "Spiritualists advocated women's rights, and women were in fact equal to men within Spiritualist practice, polity, and ideology."<sup>29</sup>

In addition, there has been much research into when, how, and whether the particular religious denominations we focus on in this paper embraced feminism. Research on the United Church of Christ has revealed a mixed pattern of both progressive and conservative gender norms. Scholars note that theologically, women are "equal with men, equally lost in sin and equally in need of God's grace in Jesus Christ;" however, when women challenged denominational practices or authority, they were punished.<sup>30</sup> By the mid to late 1920s, women in the United Church of Christ had gained some independence through their support of missionary work and their organized women's boards. Moreover by the early 1960s, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ passed an official resolution clearly denouncing gender inequality and affirming that women are "equal in value in God's sight." Such findings are consistent with our findings—that the United Church of Christ indeed demonstrated a progressive orientation to women's issues.<sup>31</sup>

Like the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association is built on a theological foundation that situates both women and men as equals. Originally comprised of two distinct denominations—the Universalist General Convention and the American Unitarian Association—both predecessors cultivated a number of women who pursued larger roles than previously available within the church. Women in both precursor denominations to the Unitarian Universalist Association were ordained, formed women's groups, participated and supported extensive missionary work, and many were suffragettes.<sup>32</sup>

As for the final group that we identify as strong promoters of women's rights, the Quakers, it has not gone unnoticed by scholars that among the five women who organized the Seneca Falls women's rights convention, four were Quakers or members of the Religious Society of Friends.<sup>33</sup> Even prior to their arrival in North America, Quakers stood apart from most other religious groups because "women joined men in public preaching and teaching, organizing and writing."<sup>34</sup> In the United States, Quaker women would build on their experiences in abolitionist circles to organize and advocate for women's rights.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars have documented how women, across religious denominations, built "self-sustaining communities" which in turn, offered them the opportunity to provide "considerable support for education, medical care, and evangelization nationally and internationally" thereby, accessing both "power and considerable status."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, as we find, historians have also found that some of the denominations examined here were indeed silent and in some cases, conservative on women's issues. For instance, the literature on the Protestant Episcopal Church indicates that women launched societies and organized groups as early as the beginning of the 19th century, however, in doing so, they "presented themselves as submissive and nonthreatening to churchmen, and did not explicitly challenge dominant social and economic structures."<sup>37</sup> After the passage of the 19th Amendment, women pushed for representation and seats on the Church's National Council but it would not be

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<sup>29</sup> See (Braude 2001). Braude writes that "Spiritualist reformers found adherence to prescribed gender roles inconsistent with the principle of individual sovereignty . . . Spiritualist rhetoric gave the reform of gender roles the same urgency that others saw in winning freedom for the slave."

<sup>30</sup> See (Zikmund 2006).

<sup>31</sup> See (Zikmund 1984).

<sup>32</sup> See (Tucker 2006).

<sup>33</sup> See (Garman 2006).

<sup>34</sup> See (Garman 2006).

<sup>35</sup> See (Speicher 2006).

<sup>36</sup> See (Boyd 1996).

<sup>37</sup> See (Thompson 2006).

until 1935 that women would be allowed a total of four seats. Other issues, like women's ordination, would not be considered and resolved until well after the second wave of feminism.<sup>38</sup>

The literature on the Methodist Episcopal Church also traces a history of women's societies and groups, mostly aimed toward supporting missionaries and providing relief work.<sup>39</sup> As early as 1880, women in this denomination sought ordination but even limited clergy rights for women would not be recognized until 1924 and it would not be until 1956 that a woman would be granted full clergy rights. However, what is noteworthy about the history of this denomination with respect to women's issues is that unlike the Protestant Episcopal Church, the male leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church did approve the role of deaconess for women as early as 1888. Equally as noteworthy is the work of prominent Methodist women, like Frances E. Willard, who organized the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, garnered "strong support from prominent clergy in the Methodist Episcopal Church," and openly supported suffrage.<sup>40</sup> That Methodist women comprised two-thirds of the denomination's members and that their organizations grew in influence and size meant that prominent men in the Church "fought desperately to retain control, arguing that ruling was the proper sphere of man and expressly forbidden to woman in the Scriptures."<sup>41</sup>

As for the United Presbyterian Church, women's groups and small societies had organized early on around church-related services, missionaries and fundraising. However, by 1832, the General Assembly for the Church addressed women's gatherings explicitly, writing that "meetings of pious women" were approved but also warning that women were forbidden to "teach and exhort, or to lead in prayer, in public and promiscuous assemblies."<sup>42</sup> Over time, the Church's staffing needs meant that women could be involved more directly in a greater variety of church activities, like teaching Sunday School, but their work would be circumscribed to "woman's work for women and children." As with the other denominations we study here, within the United Presbyterian Church, there were prominent women. For example, Mary E. James, advocated for reform around issues like polygamy and poverty during the late 19th century. However, it would not be until the early to mid-20th century that the Church's male leadership would specifically discuss gender inequality. In fact, in 1928, the General Council met with women from the church to discuss gender inequality and proceeded to delegate a research committee to submit recommendations to the 1929 General Assembly meeting. In turn, the General Assembly advanced three proposals, including: "full ecclesiastical standing to women," the ordination of women as elders, and the "licensure of women as evangelists."<sup>43</sup> However, the United Presbyterian Church Council only approved limited ordination of women in 1930 and would not extend full clergy rights to women until 1964.

Taken together, it is clear that the history of American religion and feminism has offered important findings; however, much of this literature focuses on a single groups and thus does not compare and contrast religious groups as we do here. Like the literature reviewed above, we find that the denominations that we focus upon can be categorized as either "progressive" or as "silent," or in some cases as "conservative" on women's issues. In what follows, we examine America's most "progressive" religious denominations, as defined by those who liberalized on the issue of birth control early (circa 1930), with the goal of determining which of them had noticeably feminist views, and which of them did not. We find that about half of the groups that liberalized early on birth control were feminist, while half of them were noticeably much more reticent regarding women's issues.

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<sup>38</sup> In 1970, the National Convention "approved women as deacons" but also refused to extend priesthood to women. In fact, one prominent bishop stated in response that "women can no more be priests than they can become fathers or husbands." See: (Thompsett 2006).

<sup>39</sup> See (Schmidt et al. 2006).

<sup>40</sup> See (Schmidt 1999).

<sup>41</sup> See (Schmidt 1999). (Gifford 1988).

<sup>42</sup> See (Boyd 1996).

<sup>43</sup> See (Boyd 1996).

## 5. Data and Methods

The data on which this paper relies is part of a larger research project that examines the views of thirty of the most prominent American religious groups on the issue of contraception. Together, these denominations represent more than 90 percent of Americans who claimed membership in a religious group in 1926.<sup>44</sup> The dataset begins in the decades leading up to the first wave of birth control reform (beginning in 1918) and concludes in 1965, the year that marked both the “Summer of Love” and the invention and approval of “the pill.” The actual years researched include: 1918–1919, 1924–1925, 1929–1932, 1935, 1945, 1955, and 1965. More than 10,000 articles, statements, sermons and treatises from more than 70 secular and religious periodicals form the basis of the overall project. This article relies on a subset of this data which consists of roughly 2000 articles from the religious denominations and periodicals listed on Table 1.

Given that periodicals provide the bulk of the data for this paper, more information about them is in order.<sup>45</sup> Although there was some unavoidable variation in the periodicals, in general, they were remarkably comparable. Two thirds of the periodicals were weeklies, and all of the periodicals examined here were popularly-oriented and written for a general, lay audience.

To be clear, when presenting the data from the periodicals, we do not claim nor assume that every member who was reading these periodicals agreed with the views expressed in them (or indeed, with the official stances of their denomination). Instead, we treat these periodicals and the articles in them as representative of the general beliefs and opinions of each denomination. This assumption is justified by the fact that many of the periodicals seemed to take great pains to represent both sides of the story if there was any conflict or disagreement on an issue. However, such disagreements were surprisingly rare. By and large, what was striking about the periodicals was the authoritative tone they took relative to their readership, and the lack of conflict reported, even about potentially fraught issues like eugenics, birth control, or feminism.

With the rare exception of those periodicals that were electronically searchable, research assistants examined each of the periodicals by hand and gathered all the articles that referenced birth control, eugenics, immigration, women’s roles, women’s leadership, women’s ordination, and feminism, as well as a host of other issues.<sup>46</sup> The denominations included in this paper were all early liberalizers, meaning that they had an official statement in support of birth control promulgated by an important committee or the official denomination leadership before 1935 (all also promoted legalization in their periodicals).

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<sup>44</sup> For more information on the denominations not included in this article, see (Wilde).

<sup>49</sup> The Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church in 1968.

<sup>48</sup> The years searched during the first wave of birth control liberalization were: 1929–1932; for the second wave: 1935, 1945, 1955, and 1965; and for the modern era: 2014–2017. In addition, regardless of year, any official statements on birth control, abortion, or homosexuality were gathered. If a periodical was not available for a particular year, the closest year available was searched. In addition to those searches, full key word searches were done during any year of mergers for all groups, as pending mergers tended to bring to light any remaining disagreements between groups.

<sup>47</sup> Other periodicals researched: *The Christian Century*.

<sup>45</sup> Please see Table 1 for their names.

<sup>46</sup> For the exact key word search terms used over the course of the analyses, please see Table A1 in (Wilde).

**Table 1.** America's early religious birth control advocates (contemporary names, with predecessor groups and names in bullet points).

	Periodicals <sup>47</sup> and Years Searched <sup>48</sup>	Date Liberalized
<b>Unitarian Universalist Association</b> (1961)	<i>Unitarian Universalist Register-Leader</i> (1965)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universalist General Convention (Universalist Church of America, 1942–1961)</li> </ul>	<i>Christian Leader</i> (1929–1950) <i>Universalist Leader</i> (1955–1961)	1929
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• American Unitarian Association</li> </ul>	<i>Christian Register</i> (1929–1955)	1930
<b>United Church of Christ</b> (1957)	<i>United Church Herald</i> (1958–1965)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evangelical and Reformed Church (1934)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reformed Church in the United States</li> <li>- Evangelical Synod of North America</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<i>Messenger</i> (1936–1955) <i>Evangelical Herald</i> (1929–1936)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congregational Christian Churches (1931)</li> </ul>	<i>Advance</i> (1935–1955)	1931
<b>United Methodist Church</b> (1968) <sup>49</sup>	<i>Christian Advocate</i> (1929–1965)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methodist Church (1939)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Methodist Episcopal Church</li> <li>- Methodist Episcopal Church, South</li> </ul> </li> </ul>		1931
<b>Presbyterian Church (United States of America)</b> (1983)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (1958)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- United Presbyterian Church of North America</li> <li>- Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<i>United Presbyterian</i> (1929–1955) <i>Presbyterian</i> (1935–1945)	1931
	<i>Presbyterian Life</i> (1948–1965)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presbyterian Church in the United States</li> </ul>	<i>Presbyterian Survey</i> (1929–1965)	1960
<b>Friends General Convention</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Society of Friends</b> (Orthodox)</li> <li>• <b>Society of Friends</b> (Hicksite) (reunified with Orthodox Friends in 1955)</li> </ul>	<i>Friend's Journal</i> (1935–1965) <i>Friend</i> (1945–1955)	1933
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Protestant Episcopal Church</b></li> </ul>	<i>Living Church</i> (1929–1955)	1934

## 6. America's Feminist Religious Groups

The Unitarian Universalist Church, and its precursor denominations the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist General Convention were always openly supportive of women's rights. As early as 1929, the Unitarian periodical the *Christian Leader* noted with approval that: "woman is coming into her own, [and] is entering all fields of endeavor and is making good."<sup>50</sup> After asserting that, "we cannot go backward and woman's gains must stand," the article went on to assert the religious basis for these sentiments:

Jesus stood for the equality of the sexes, making no distinction except in accordance with the attitude of the day. For he accepted the ministrations of women always and women were of his close followers.<sup>51</sup>

A few years later, in 1932, an article titled "Some Women of the Bible", in the same periodical argued that biblical figures such as Eve and Deborah were leaders among both men and women:

Eve was not a club woman (I refer to organizations) but she certainly was not one to stay at home all day after her husband had gone to work [ . . . ] Besides an explorer, Eve was a pioneer scientist [ . . . ] the first potential political economist." It goes on to state "Who [ . . . ] was so spectacular a figure as Deborah, the fourth Judge of Israel? At a time when a great military genius and leader was needed, Deborah was the outstanding figure. She possessed courage, foresight, will, determination, and the ability to pick the men capable of carrying out her designs."<sup>52</sup>

In 1935, the other denomination that would eventually join the Universalists, the American Unitarian Association, asked provocatively in its periodical the *Christian Register*, "Are churchwomen people?"<sup>53</sup> The answer, according to this periodical was not entirely positive:

Ten or a dozen persons, churchwomen themselves, have to this rather flippant question, made an entirely serious answer—'Not necessarily.' [ . . . ] it seems to me that the question loses its flippancy and becomes a challenge. Are churchwomen people? If they are not, why not?

The article then went on to answer this question by comparing the histories of various Christian denominations in relation to women's roles:

[ . . . ] In spite of the fact that the New Testament was written by bachelors, the names of several women important in the early church are preserved to us. Even before that time, we know that women played a part in Jesus' life [ . . . ] There have always been famous women connected with the Christian Church [ . . . ] The Catholic Church discriminated against women in politics and education, so also inevitably in religion. But the Protestants have no such high-church doctrine, so that it is possible for women to have an equal position. Still even as late as in Colonial times women were discriminated against.

The article continued on by emphasizing that Unitarianism was ahead of these other religious groups, but still closed by asserting that more must be done:

Indeed, women had no recognized place in the church until the advent of Unitarianism. Not even Congregational churches before that time ever had a woman in office except as deaconess. This position was largely nominal, and was accorded to a widow woman of sixty

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<sup>50</sup> See (Dyar 1929).

<sup>51</sup> See (Dyar 1929).

<sup>52</sup> See (Pardee 1932).

<sup>53</sup> See (Stoneham 1935).

or over. Theoretically, Unitarianism makes no distinction between men and women, either in pew or pulpit [ . . . ] But one wonders whether women pastors do not still feel at a slight disadvantage at times, and whether the old prejudice does not still exist under cover [ . . . ] equality is what we must demand [ . . . ] Let us forget sex distinction. May the best person, most fitted for the job, fill the place. I know of twelve churches which have or have had women as chairmen of their parish committees [ . . . ] Early Unitarians rightly earned the title of liberal, and unless we are to be unworthy of our heritage we, too, must be more liberal, more open-minded and more progressive.<sup>54</sup>

Consistent with their open advocacy for women's equality a decade earlier, in 1945 the American Unitarian Association's *Christian Register* forcefully asserted that, "equal opportunity must be guaranteed all Americans, regardless of race, color, creed, or sex." The article continued by asserting that "restricting woman workers, for example, cuts our national productivity by as much as a fourth."<sup>55</sup> And, in a quote that showed ownership of the suffrage movement decades after its success, the *Christian Register* argued that same year that,

Whether it be apathy, a fear of social change, or sheer ignorance of history that moves men to speak [ . . . ] from pulpit and in private conversation. It would be well for us to remind such men that not only has morality been legislated, but so also has immorality. Unitarians should be the first to remember that our present degree of democracy and equality came through legislation for compulsory education, for a new status for millions of slaves, for a ballot in the hands of every woman.<sup>56</sup>

The United Church of Christ's earlier denominations were also early advocates for women. The Congregational Christian Church, which was formed in 1931, and its precursor groups of the Congregational Church and the Christian Church were both openly supportive of women very early on. For example, in their 1929 article titled, "A Tribute to Women," the *Congregationalist* reported on a service that was held "as a tribute to the distinguished leadership of women in the great movements of the time and in recognition of the essential democracy of the feminine creative achievement."<sup>57</sup>

### 6.1. Women in Ministry

It was common for more feminist groups to report positively on any leadership positions that were already being filled by women. Thus, in 1945 the *Christian Leader* reported that their "national organization of Universalist young people has had a woman president for some years."<sup>58</sup>

Of course, the most obvious leadership position at issue for many religious groups was that of minister. Many feminist groups also emphasized their openness to or desire for female ministers. For example, in 1929 the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* stated proudly that "the Christian Church has always been rightfully proud of the fact that we were the first to ordain women to the ministry."<sup>59</sup> In 1945, the Unitarian periodical the *Christian Leader* wrote:

The Universalist church needs more ministers—many more, if it is to be in the best sense a really missionary church. And this its gospel requires it to be. If it is to fulfill this mission, our church must have as recruits young men and women of character who are eager [to serve].<sup>60</sup>

After the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States merged to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church (another precursor to the United Church of Christ),

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<sup>54</sup> See (Stoneham 1935).

<sup>55</sup> See (Pepper 1945).

<sup>56</sup> See (Fritchman 1945).

<sup>57</sup> See (n.a. 1929).

<sup>58</sup> See (n.a. 1945).

<sup>59</sup> See (Morrill 1929).

<sup>60</sup> See (Atwood 1945).

the merged periodical the *Messenger* made it clear in 1955 that women who wanted to “should be given an opportunity to serve on an equal status with men”.<sup>61</sup>

Other groups emphasized that women had been serving as ministers in their denomination for some time. Thus, when reprinting on the fact that, “recently a distinguished theological school opened its doors to women students,” the periodical for the Congregational Christian Church, the *Advance* noted:

as a matter of fact, as we all know, the people of many states can testify that women are in pulpits. They are keeping little churches from dying out, they are uniting churches and serving, as best they can, on tiny salaries, the parishes that male ministers with wives and children can hardly afford to serve or where they do not want to serve. Hats off, then to the ‘backwoods work’ often unknown and sometimes heroic, of our rural women ministers.

This article closed by urging “our seminaries [to] give more of them the best possible preparation and encouragement.”<sup>62</sup>

## 6.2. Women as Leaders

As they did with the ministry, it was common among the feminist groups to emphasize the important leadership roles that women had already been doing in many of their churches. For example, in 1945 an article in the *Advance* said:

For many years women in our denomination have taken a prominent part in the life of the local church as trustees, members of the church committee, delegates to church meetings, teachers and leaders in the church school [ . . . ] Often they serve as moderators or in other positions of responsibility [ . . . ]<sup>63</sup>

Often these statements referenced (whether real or imagined) a feminist past. Thus, the same article quoted above went on to note:

As women, working together, as near before to help cultivate the spirit of Christ in every area of human life, we seek to carry forward the torch which our great grandmothers lighted long ago in the churches of America.<sup>64</sup>

These feminist groups did not merely report on women’s leadership positions in the church. They also reported positively on the women known to be leaders in the early women’s right’s movement. Thus, upon the death of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1935, the *Advance* called Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt,<sup>65</sup> “her friend and fellow warrior in the battle for women’s rights and in women’s warfare for a better social order [ . . . ]”<sup>66</sup> That same year the closely related American Unitarian Association’s *Christian Register*, which would soon merge with the *Advance*, reminded readers that Abigail Adams was a Unitarian:

In the new code of laws [ . . . ] I desire you would remember the ladies”, wrote Abigail Adams to her husband at the Continental Congress. This Unitarian and first politically-minded woman was urging the founding fathers to share with their wives and mothers some of those rights which they were claiming for themselves [ . . . ]<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See (n.a. 1955a).

<sup>62</sup> See (Morton 1955).

<sup>63</sup> See (Stearns 1945).

<sup>64</sup> See (Stearns 1945).

<sup>65</sup> See also (n.a. 1935a).

<sup>66</sup> See (n.a. 1935b).

<sup>67</sup> See (Douglas 1955).

The article went on to critically acknowledge however that Adam's contemporaries were far from "revolutionaries" when it came to women:

Yet even the Revolutionary leaders had no thought of changing the dependence of their women [ . . . ] and John Adams, in spite of his Abigail, reflected the usual view when he noted that Mrs. John Hancock was in mixed society 'totally silent as a lady ought to be.'

This article ends by noting the difficulties the foremothers of Unitarian feminism, such as Adams, had to face, closing with an insistence that Unitarianism was itself a crucial ideological resource for early feminists.

It took courage therefore for the wives and daughters of the Revolution to apply to themselves the new republican self-confidence. They had to lose their sense of guilt (which stemmed of course from Eve's fondness for apples!) and accept the idea that even ancient rules should meet the test of truth. Furthermore, they had to believe that all human beings had within them God-given gifts which it was a duty to develop. In short, it took those very traits which Unitarianism supplied. It was not by chance therefore that Unitarians acted as catalysts on society, and in a crucial period supplied much of the leadership. This leadership had to start by building confidence in women as people.<sup>68</sup>

Whether or not Unitarianism was a crucial resource for early female leaders, they along with the Congregational Christian Church and the Quakers made open assertions about women's equality more generally.

### 6.3. Asserting Equality

There were many instances where the three denominations we've characterized as more feminist asserted women's equality. For example, in 1935 the *Advance* reported that, "Oxford University has recently removed the last barrier of discrimination against women students. The effect of the statute making all degrees equally open to men and women has bearing particularly upon the degrees of Bachelor and Doctor of Divinity, which were a subject of controversy at the time women were admitted to Oxford."<sup>69</sup> Not content to leave this positive statement alone, that same year the same periodical asked, "Now that women are [ . . . ] as free as the law can make them, are they any happier?" The article quoted a woman answering emphatically in the affirmative, suggesting that "the question could only be asked by a generation that is simply ignorant regarding what has been done." It closed with:

A complete revolution in the status of women has been effected even in the last twenty-five years, and those who doubt the value or desirableness of the changes should try putting the legislative clock back for even one decade and hear what men as well women have to say about it.<sup>70</sup>

In 1955, the Congregational Christian Church's *Advance* wrote emphatically, that "the fact is that in the church of Christ, as scripturally understood, there is no differentiation between men and women except that which has been introduced arbitrarily from outside."<sup>71</sup> Similarly, that same year, the Quakers asserted that they have "always done more than accord women a mechanical recognition of equality", especially when compared to other churches, "within the Society of Friends women never had to struggle for their rights."<sup>72</sup> What's more, the *Christian Register* devoted an "entire issue" to the "celebration of the 75th birthday of the Unitarian Women's Alliance." The introduction to the issue noted:

<sup>68</sup> See (Douglas 1955).

<sup>69</sup> See (n.a. 1935c).

<sup>70</sup> See (n.a. 1935d).

<sup>71</sup> See (Short 1955).

<sup>72</sup> See (n.a. 1955b).

Two guest editorials by the heads of the two women's organizations in the Universalist and Unitarian Churches follow. 'Hats off to the Ladies!' we find ourselves saying. Yes, of course. But the lifted hat is a mark of deference only. Instead we offer a handclasp, a symbol of fellowship, of mutual understanding and mutual respect.<sup>73</sup>

That same year, the *Register* also reported that "We have moved into an era in which equality of status, companionship on a single level, and participation in the same range of activities mark the relations of men and women, both socially and religiously."<sup>74</sup> After stating that although there was still a division of labor between the sexes, it then asked provocatively:

How many churches would really consider a woman minister; how many faculties a woman professor; how many organizations a woman chief executive, how many law firms a woman colleague? There are in truth numerous career women, many of them unmarried, who serve with distinction in posts just below the top in government agencies and other organizations, yet have no hope of advancement to the chief positions because of unspoken customs—just as in many associations the secretary is usually a woman, but never the president. Gratitude is due these women who so effectively serve society; but let us not rest satisfied until opportunity for such as they becomes truly equal to that of men. Let the church look to its own house in this regard and at least strive to match the record of social work and of elementary and secondary education, where for obvious historical reasons women are closer to equal status.<sup>75</sup>

By 1965, then, it will come as no surprise that these groups were unequivocal in their support for equal rights for women. For example, the Society of Friends asserted:

Women have a heritage in religion to regain, develop, and carry forward. In this careful study of the Old and New Testaments and the history of the Christian Church, Margaret Crook details women's loss of status and function in religious leadership [ . . . ] in the centuries since, women have been limited largely to domesticity or to special religious Orders. Occasionally in recent centuries the status quo has been challenged by those (including Elizabeth Fry and the Society of Friends) who accepted and encouraged the spiritual ministry of women. Gradually the climate has changed, until today more and more emphasis is being put on 'partners in religion.'<sup>76</sup>

That same year, the United Church of Christ reported that among "other significant recommendations," a recent conference "urged the U.S. Congress to ratify UN conventions on genocide, slavery, forced labor and political rights for women."<sup>77</sup>

By 1965, however, it was clear that real changes were occurring. That same year, the nondenominational but mainline periodical the *Christian Century* wrote an article on the book credited with starting the second wave of the feminist movement, *The Feminine Mystique*, and the negative implications it had for the Church:

[W]hile Christ gives women a new stature, the church in practice sells women short in the following ways: (1) by producing theology that claims that women are 'mysteriously different,' the implication being that women are inherently incapable of life in its fullest sense, (2) by quoting and interpreting Scripture to limit women to a feminine role or to enable women to stomach their servitude and lack of full personhood [ . . . ] (4) by endorsing

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<sup>73</sup> See (Priest 1955).

<sup>74</sup> See (R. 1955).

<sup>75</sup> See (R. 1955).

<sup>76</sup> See (Pineo 1965).

<sup>77</sup> See (n.a. 1965a).

marriage manuals that present marriage as an exclusive profession to be chosen over other vocations, paid or voluntary, when the truth is that marriage is but one part of life [ . . . ] (5) by limiting women's church work to housekeeping-teaching-calling functions and omitting capable women in the policy-making, executive or liturgical areas. All of which adds up to a failure to see women as persons, to accept them as persons, though their work, money, and prayers are most acceptable.<sup>78</sup>

The author concludes by stating "there is no Christianity for women separate from Christianity for men."<sup>79</sup>

That same year, the same periodical published an article which asked "Are Women People?" in the title. The article argued forcefully that both women and men should take the advice offered in *The Feminine Mystique* and "face the question" about the purpose of life:

[I]n recent years, the problem of woman's rights has loomed second only to that of civil rights. Many commentators in the daily press, periodicals, and books have taken sides in the great debate: [ . . . ] perhaps the best thing to be said of *The Feminine Mystique* and *Sex and the Single Girls* is that they urge women to be themselves. The solution for many women, and for men too for that matter, lies in Betty Friedan's own solution: 'I could sense no purpose in my life. I could find no peace, until I faced the question and worked out my own answer.'<sup>80</sup>

## 7. Silent or Critical of Women's Issues

In contrast to the outspoken support women's issues received among the precursor denominations that would later form the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Church, and the quieter, but still strong support they received from the Quakers, three of the denominations that liberalized early on birth control were much more circumspect in their support of women's issues, especially early on. These were the Methodist Episcopal Church (which became the United Methodist Church in 1968 when it merged with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South) the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A and its precursor the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

Of these three groups, the Methodist Episcopal Church was the most vocal about women's issues early on, with a regular column in the *Christian Advocate* called, "The Methodist Woman."<sup>81</sup> However, the articles in these columns, and in the periodical as a whole, tended to emphasize that the women chronicled performed important missionary work for the Church without neglecting their duties as a "wife, mother or grandmother."<sup>82</sup>

In comparison to what the more feminist groups said about women in the ministry, often discussing their early ordination of women with pride, in 1955, the northern Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A, a precursor to the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was noticeably more hesitant about it. Although, they also reported on Harvard's Divinity School's decision to admit women,<sup>83</sup> a series of other articles reported on the fact that the denomination was also addressing the issue for themselves that same year.<sup>84</sup> In December, the periodical reported with caution that while "the official results received by the Office of the General Assembly," indicated that "there is strong support so far for the

<sup>78</sup> See (Suthers 1965).

<sup>79</sup> See (Suthers 1965).

<sup>80</sup> See (Perkins 1965).

<sup>81</sup> See (n.a. 1935e).

<sup>82</sup> See (n.a. 1935e).

<sup>83</sup> See (n.a. 1955c).

<sup>84</sup> See (n.a. 1930; Craig and Burkhart 1995).

ordination of women to the Presbyterian ministry,” the article stressed that “delegates are giving this decision careful thought without regard to public argument.”<sup>85</sup>

By 1965, *Presbyterian Life*, had come around to a more feminist view, but the sole article in that publication that year which promoted that view restricted itself to discussing how women’s roles in the Church should be expanded. The article began by asking, “What is the biggest waste in most churches today?” The answer?

In my opinion, it is the time, the talent, and the energy of the women in the congregation [ . . . ] look at those activities: Sunday-school classes where valiant but comparatively untrained women match wits with bored children; bake sales, bazaars, and church suppers where women who could afford at least three dollars an hour for their time spend countless hours baking, sewing, and cooking in order to meet their organizational budget quota of five and ten dollars apiece. This is how most churchwomen are spending most of their church-oriented time while the needs of a complex and crying world outside the sanctuary doors beg for the most creative thinking and the very best efforts of concerned Christian women everywhere.

The article continued on, asking why the churches were “unwilling or unable to tap the reservoir of woman-hours and woman-skills either lying dormant or being used elsewhere by the women of the congregation?”<sup>86</sup>

The Protestant Episcopal Church was even more reserved in its statements on women, reporting often on women’s organizations and their importance to the Church,<sup>87</sup> but in carefully circumscribed tones. In fact, unlike the other groups examined, its periodical, *Living Church*, published as many articles promoting the recruitment of more men for Church leadership positions<sup>88</sup> as it did on women’s activities or issues. Thus, for example, the *Living Church* argued the following about women’s roles at the upcoming convention in an article that was ironically called, “Womanpower”:

Although the General Convention is itself an all-male gathering, there will be women present in abundance when that body meets in Honolulu in September. Not only will many of the members of the Convention be accompanied by their wives—who will take their places with other female visitors but the great triennial meeting of the Woman’s Auxiliary, held at the same time and place of General Convention will bring to Honolulu 300 or more women of the Church. The women were chosen by the several diocesan branches of the Woman’s Auxiliary to represent the diocesan auxiliaries at the big meeting [ . . . ] they were chosen by women elected by the several parish branches of the WA to represent the parish auxiliaries at their respective diocesan meetings. Thus they represent the Church’s woman-power.<sup>89</sup>

Even in 1965, the *Living Church* continued to emphasize the separate offices that men and women held in The Protestant Episcopal Church. In an article titled, “The Office of the Deaconess”, the periodical reminded readers that “the church does have an office of ministry to which women may be ordained—the office of deaconess in the Church of God.” The article then went on to underscore that:

There is no precedent for women priests in Catholic tradition. Our Lord chosen men to be His Apostles; the Seventy sent to preach were men; the Holy Communion was instituted in the presence of men only; the Great Commission and the power to pronounce forgiveness to the sinner, were given only to men. Women, however, ministered to the Lord, stood faithful at the cross, and were chosen the first witnesses of the resurrection [ . . . ] the office

<sup>85</sup> See (n.a. 1955d).

<sup>86</sup> See (Simonds and Schram 1965).

<sup>87</sup> E.g., (n.a. 1955e; n.a. 1955f; n.a. 1955g).

<sup>88</sup> E.g., (Stroup 1955; n.a. 1955h).

<sup>89</sup> See (n.a. 1955i).

of deaconess was created in apostolic days within the framework of the Church's ministry. It offers abundant opportunity to use the best talents and abilities women possess.<sup>90</sup>

## 8. Conclusions

In sum, some of America's most prominent religious groups did indeed speak up early and often about women's rights—but others—just as prominent and just as progressive on the issue of contraception—were much more hesitant. Thus, while the issue of contraception is most certainly gendered, and for many, deeply tied to issues of feminism today, early support for it among America's most prominent religious groups does not seem to have been dependent upon a belief in feminism.

Of course, the findings we put forward here are not without qualification and contradiction. First, we should note that even feminist groups made arguments in favor of "complementarity." For example, the Congregational Christian Church wrote in 1930:

No priest can be in any doubt that his ministry needs the complementary ministry of women in order to be properly fruitful, or that the woman's contribution is every bit as important and as exacting in gifts of ability and grace as his own. But will this feminine contribution be best made by women forcing themselves into traditional masculine molds? [ . . . ]. The Church's traditional insistence that some functions are meant for men does after all correspond with the purpose of God in which the two sexes are designed not to be identical and interchangeable, but complementary?<sup>91</sup>

Likewise, even the more feminist groups were careful to qualify their support for women's rights. In 1955, an article in *The Advance* argued that women's first place should always be the home:

'Male and female created he them.' This is another simple fact with occupational implications. It suggests immediately that woman's vocation, by virtue of creation, is that of mother. Let no one sell this vocation short—it is in the home that God's most important creative work is done, where young life is nurtured until it becomes distinctively human. Because the home is the institution most fundamental in human existence, girls should give it prior consideration and both sexes should determine never to engage in work which undermines the home.<sup>92</sup>

Conversely, the groups that we found to be more reticent in relation to women's rights were certainly coming around by 1965. Thus, *The Living Church* emphasized in 1965:

Women have proved their capacity for doing every kind of work which is to be found in the work of the ministry. Who will question that they are equal to men in ability to pray, to preach, to teach, to counsel, to seek out the lost, to minister to the needy in Christ's name?<sup>93</sup>

Thus, the issue of which American religious groups supported women rights, when, and how, is undoubtedly complex. We hope, however, that this analysis provides at least an approximate categorization of those groups that were on the frontlines of the fight to legalize birth control. It would be plausible to assume today that those groups that liberalized early on birth control were feminists. Some indeed were. Others were not—at least not yet.

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<sup>90</sup> See (Truesdell 1965).

<sup>91</sup> See (n.a. 1930).

<sup>92</sup> See (Million 1955).

<sup>93</sup> See (n.a. 1965b).

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