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## Politics, Religion &amp; Women's Public Vision: Online Discussion

Thursday, December 15, 2005: 1 – 2 PM EST

Over the past year, a debate over moral values and politics has grown increasingly prominent and divisive. Since 2003, the [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#) (IWPR) has been exploring how women think about values and politics, particularly in religious organizations. IWPR's research finds that many religious progressives are committed to a set of moral concepts that include responsibility for the well-being of others and interconnectedness with the most disadvantaged in society.



IWPR has convened a [Working Group on Women's Public Vision](#), made up of women leaders in politics, religion, social justice, and feminist organizing, who are working to promote women's perspectives in conversations about values and politics. The group is also working to build stronger connections between religious women activists and feminist movements. Although the two groups share many goals, they only rarely collaborate. There is potential for collaborations that will help build a strong, new movement of women from diverse backgrounds.

Talk with Amy Caiazza and Rita Nakashima Brock about the rift between religious women activists and feminist movements, how we can bridge this rift and how issues of race, ethnicity, and class both contribute to the rift and point to ways to overcome it.

Featured Panelists:

Rita Nakashima Brock is Founding Co-Director of [Faith Voices for the Common Good](#), an award-winning author, and a respected international scholar who has worked for over two decades in the field of feminist theology. She has served on the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Religion, chaired their Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, and served for six years on the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession. She has also been a member and/or chair of national boards of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. During 2001–2002, she was a Fellow at the Harvard Divinity School, and from 1997–2001, Dr. Brock directed the Fellowship Program at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, formerly known as the Bunting Institute, one of the nation's premiere research institutes for women.

Amy Caiazza is Study Director for Democracy and Society Programs at the [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#). She holds a Ph.D. in political science from Indiana University, where she focused on women's organizing strategies and their influence on politics and policy. Since joining IWPR in 1998, she has led a variety of projects on women's political and civic participation domestically and internationally, including a current project on women's values, activism, and leadership within religious and interfaith social justice groups. She also oversees IWPR's project on [The Status of Women in the States](#) and has played an active role in developing its research and outreach components.

Moderator: Thank you for participating in this online discussion about politics, religion & women's public vision. Responses to your questions and comments will be posted in the order in which they are answered. To see the most recent post, please scroll down to the bottom of the page. Refresh the page regularly to see the most updated responses from our panelists.

To receive announcements about future online chats with progressive policy experts, [sign up](#) to receive the Moving Ideas Network weekly e-newsletter.

Transcripts of this chat will be available at

[http://www.movingideas.org/chat/Women\\_Policy/Women\\_Policy.php](http://www.movingideas.org/chat/Women_Policy/Women_Policy.php).

-- Diana, Moderator

Cheryl Johnson: My question is what steps are being taken to make sure that after so many years of religion being used and manipulated



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that we are doing what we need to do to make sure that it is not being used to hurt woman?(abortion issue has been used against woman when it comes to the bible, my understanding the bible does not mention anything about abortion)

Rita Nakashima Brock, FVCG: Dear Cheryl, Human beings use ideologies to make meaning and to support all kinds of things, including a will to have power over others as well as to behave morally toward others.

Feminists have been working in religion traditions for two centuries or more and continue our work. The biggest change in the past 30 years has been the huge amount of funding by SECULAR right money to create think tanks that use the religious right to advance their pro-capitalist, pro-military agenda. Progressive money has different funding patterns that go to direct services and short-term funding for new projects.

In the middle of this 30-year struggle, feminists of faith have created an enormous body of work and worked hard in their own traditions on behalf of women's well-being and dignity, as well as leadership. We continue, despite the public perception fostered by right wing money that all religion is conservative.

It might interest you to know that *Roe v. Wade* was started by women in their church basement in Dallas. All the mainline Protestant denominations, as well as Reform Judaism took pro-choice positions a long time ago. Bev Harrison wrote the first feminist religious book, *Our Right to Choose*, in support of reproductive choice in the early 1980s.

There is a lot more I could say, but I want to answer a few more questions. You might find *God Forbid*, ed Kathleen Sands, a good place to look for feminist work on sexuality. Rita

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:03:04

Holly: Can you talk more about the rift between feminists and religious women? I'm not sure I get what you're talking about since I am religious and feminist. Did your research find that many women who are feminists aren't religious?

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: Hello, Holly! Thanks for your great question. In our research, we found that many women who are religious and feminist feel unwelcome in feminist movements. Many work on social justice issues, and have feminist ideas, but don't associate with feminist or women's movements. We have also found that "secular" feminists (for lack of a better term) are frequently suspicious of religious women, because they associate them with the more patriarchal aspects of many religious traditions. This has led to a divide in which women on either side don't often work together.

That said, I think that there are a lot of women out there, like you, who are both religious and feminist. We're hoping to bring out their voices in our work.

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:07:22

Molly Casteel: I attended the AWID forum in Bangkok, Thailand, this fall and was faced with the problem of being one of a handful of faith-identified feminists. Only two sessions of the forum spoke about faith identity and one resolved that it was incompatible with being feminist. It was almost de rigeur to equate faith with fundamentalism as well in even the plenary sessions. There was little recognition that patriarchy

exists where culture exists (with few isolated exceptions). Instead, religion was patriarchy so women in religion are misguided at best and co-opted or worse...they could not be considered real feminists in the group think presented. There was no recognition that most of the world's women identify with a faith group. The second session was better in that three scholars who identify as faith members led discussions in how they navigate their feminist identities within their Muslim, Buddhist and Christian identities. All spoke to values like you all lifted up in your (Ties That Bind) work. What kind of work do feminists (within faith movements and even denominations) need to do to encourage secular feminists to work with us?, see us as allies?, move forward? The forum promised to look at "How does change happen?"...I found it sobering to see where many are...we can't even agree on vocabulary! As a person working within a denomination to remove or weaken gender injustice and its related partners of racism and poverty, I am seeking scholarly help as well as practical solutions.

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: Hi, Molly! I think that your question typifies how many religious or faith-identified feminists feel. I also think that by going to the conference, you contributed a lot to what needs to happen: religious feminists need to be visible about their values and beliefs, so that it's clear that women like you are allies in working to improve women's lives. And we need to keep engaging in conversations about both what's in common and what's different about the ways we look at the world.

One thing I think is particularly interesting is that we assume that a "secular" world view is more objective, inclusive, and/or rational than a religious one. In fact, many scholars have noted that many of our most cherished secular American values are based in Protestantism, and especially white Protestant traditions. As a result, building real inclusivity may mean stepping back and looking about what we mean by "secular" values.

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:14:34

Beth Maples-Bays: I cannot see a chat room on this page:  
[http://www.movingideas.org/chat/Women\\_Policy/Women\\_Policy.php](http://www.movingideas.org/chat/Women_Policy/Women_Policy.php)  
Help!

Moderator: Hi Beth: This isn't a "chat room" kind of discussion. You can submit questions by clicking on the red button and entering your question in the space provided. Once our panelists respond to your question, it will appear at the bottom of this webpage.

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:19:02

Elizabeth Sholes: What is the largest stumbling block between progressive feminist women of faith and secular feminists? Has the pollution of 'faith' by the religious right made it impossible for these two virtually identical groups to speak to each other?

Rita Nakashima Brock, FVCG: Hi Libby, I think there are several barriers to dialogue:

1. Some forms of religion are very bad for women and even liberal religious traditions can have abusive or bad leaders and practitioners. Some women give up on religion because it has harmed them personally. Some who leave find a positive route back, but others prefer not to engage religion or actively oppose it.

I think the problem here is over generalizing from personal experience. I actually had a positive experience in high school in a

fundamentalist Baptist church (I write about this in *Proverbs of Ashes*, my memoir with Rebecca Parker), because the minister was a wonderful human being and taught me free-thinking (people in that church in the mid 1960s were also pro-choice). Even conservative religion can sometimes be helpful to women, but it rarely sees us as equals in authority or leadership.

2. The religious right is well funded and uses both grassroots organizing and media campaigns to create a huge public profile for itself. Plus, the media like heat and controversy, so they tend to cover feminists and religious progressives, only when we oppose the right. This has meant little press coverage for the positive work being done by feminists in religion and the progress we have made. For example, the Faith Trust Institute in Seattle has worked for decades to prevent clergy sexual abuse, but they seemed invisible during the Catholic abuse crisis. So, unless you are already involved in religious circles, you might not know we exist.
3. Religious leaders, even progressive ones, do not necessarily care about feminist work in religion--they may even see it as threatening their privilege. Hence, they don't inform their congregations about it. I've been surprised to discover how many feminist working on secular issues belong to liberal religious groups and have no idea there is tons of feminist work going on. They just avoid identifying that they are in religion when they work in feminist groups. They should be pushing their religious leaders to teach feminist religious ideas.

I am sure there are other issues as well. These are just the first ones that I can think of, based on my experience running an academic women's studies program as well as being a church activist on justice for women, gays, lesbians, transgender people, and people of color. Rita

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:20:48

Jessie: What would be the benefit of healing the rift between religious women and feminists? What would it accomplish?

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: I think there's tremendous potential in building stronger relationships among religious women and women's movements. Obviously, there's strength in numbers, and the more women feel welcome in women's movement organizing, the more power we have in arguing for change.

In addition, religious women may provide women's movements with new ways of thinking about the issues facing women in this country and around the world. Our research found that religious women often focus on values of community and shared responsibility in arguing for social change, an interesting complement to the rights-based language often used by the most visible feminist movements. By thinking about how these visions can work together, I believe we can make powerful arguments on behalf of improving the lives of Americans who are disadvantaged by not just gender but race, ethnicity, and class. And these arguments could resonate with a wide swath of American women and men.

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:22:22

Carol Rosenstiel: Why is it that each group seems to want to DEFINE the other group? Why can't we accept the other's definition of self?

Rita Nakashima Brock, FVCG: Hi Carol, As feminists often say, the

power of naming is important, so defining the other in one's own frame can be a way to shape perceptions to one's benefit, which comes at a cost to the "other" as one defines her. On the other hand, feminists, of all people, should respect the power of self-naming.

That said, let me note that your framing of the question, as an either/or, limits the picture. I have spent much of my life straddling the worlds of feminism in higher ed and theological education. My experience is that religious feminists are well aware of the major schools of feminist thought and organizations that advocate for women--we find some of this work helpful and life-giving. We read feminist theory and support feminist orgs. Secular feminists avoid religion, and my experience is that they neither understand nor support feminists in religion. As Helen Hunt in *Faith and Feminism* has noted, women activists in religion have been around for over 100 years, collecting funds and using them to help women all over the world. The secular women's funding network has only been around about one generation. We need to join forces.

The avoidance of religion by secular feminists actually hurts women, partly because I think those of us in religion are the people best equipped to counter the religious right, not with secular discourse--a weak values alternative to religion--but with challenges to their religious claims. It is also true that many women are religious, and it would be a mistake for feminists to abandon us. I do a lot of speaking to religious women. I find they are receptive to feminist ideas when we are seen as not attacking their faith, but enlarging it or making it truer to their own ideals. When I spoke on a very conservative Christian radio show about *Proverbs of Ashes*, the producer said they'd gotten an unusual number of calls about where to buy the book, mostly from women, because it addresses religious ideas in relation to violence.

One more point: the media has painted feminism as angry, anti-male, etc., which has created a negative portrait of feminists. This mistaken perception makes many women, with feminist convictions, hesitate to even use the word because we are immediately seen as a stereotype. I think religious feminists need to take responsibility for undermining that stereotype. Rita

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:38:09

Jill Kendall: Perhaps feminist and religious women could work together on issues that are of concern to both, such as ending sexual exploitation of women. It seems there is agreement on issues of concern (e.g. unintended pregnancies) but significant disagreement on how best to address these issues (e.g. abstinence only sex ed v. comprehensive sex ed).

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: Jill, I like your question because it points both to the potential that's out there and some of the work that needs to be done building understanding. Many of the conversations I've recently had bringing together religious and secular feminists have focused on this kind of common goal: other examples of areas of common ground are issues related to violence or poverty. I think this is a promising strategy.

At the same time, the divisions you describe are murkier than we often assume. Many religious women (including many who submitted questions for this discussion) are supportive of what's broadly called reproductive rights, often based on moral arguments in support of women's agency. For this reason, I don't think that pro-choice feminists should fear "moral values" language as much as they often do, but should listen to the feminist moral visions that many religious women articulate. (Rita's work

is a good example of this kind of feminist theologizing, by the way!) I think we would benefit for both reasons from more open conversations about these issues.

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:38:29

Zarrin Caldwell: I am religious (and even conservative in a few respects), but I also believe in women's rights, equal opportunities, women's leadership, social justice, etc... Alas, I think a big part of the problem is the negative connotations that have built up around the term "feminism." For example, I'm disinclined to join movements using the term because to me it means radical, women who see all men as evil, so far left it's off the spectrum, etc ... I admire your efforts to bridge some of these divides and think it's very valuable, but I think the terminology needs to be changed for the women's movement to move forward in this more inclusive direction. Any thoughts?

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: We've had a lot of conversations about this in our Working Group on Women's Public Vision. Added to your concerns are the concerns of many groups that feminism implies a white, middle-class women's agenda. For this reason, African American women have developed the term "womanist," and Latinas have developed the term "mujerista," to redefine a pro-women agenda that recognizes explicitly issues of race, ethnicity, and class.

I think these questions are important and do speak to the need to reframe some of the language of women's movement organizing. At the same time, I think we need to recognize that women all over the country have benefited from the activist work that our foremothers have done, and I don't want to toss that history out with the term feminism.

I really do believe, as I said earlier, that these language issues are part of why "secular" women's movements could benefit from working more closely with religious women activists. The perspectives, values, and concepts used by religious feminists, including both those at the grassroots and those working as theologians and scholars of religion, could help us redefine what it means to support women and improve their lives. That doesn't necessarily mean completely throwing out the language and concepts that feminism has used in the past--particularly the rights-based language that is often most visible. But it does mean fusing that language with concepts of compassion, caring, and shared responsibility, which I think can speak to women from many backgrounds.

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:49:00

Beth Maples-Bays: What, if any, efforts are being made to include the various Pagan paths in your work toward bridging the rift between religious women activists and feminist movements? Most of the attempts on the part of progressive and LGBT communities are heavily weighted with Christians and Jews. While I honor and respect their spiritual paths, I would hope that this conversation would also include other paths outside the Judeo-Christian paradigm. I am particularly interested in knowing how the Women's Spirituality movement figures into the equation.

Rita Nakashima Brock, FVCG: Beth, I think it fair to say Pagan paths such as Wicca, etc. are part of the feminist mix in religion, but still marginalized, even in these secular-religious conversations. The group most demonized in religion in the public media by the right are the Pagans (as devil-worshippers, etc.). I think a lot more work needs to be done in the intersections of coalitions of religious feminists in countering these stereotypes.

I agree much of the LGBT discourse is focused in traditional religions, partly because the religious right claims those traditions and those of us who belong to them have a certain leverage in arguing against their homophobia.

In graduate school in the late 1970s, I explored Goddess traditions, Wicca, and other forms of the women's spirituality movement, and learned a great deal from them, but the groups I knew then were mostly white and middle class. And, in a way similar to the secular feminist movement, they were disinterested in or hostile to those of us whose concerns included our roots in more traditional forms of religion. In the meantime, I began processes of study and political organizing that have put me in a different, more accepting and critical, relationship to my own Protestant tradition. Because I am a cross-cultural, bi-racial feminist, with roots in Buddhism and 45 years of work in Christianity, I know there will not be a perfect fit for me, so I make a religious home where I can.

We have a long way to go to, however, to create coalitions across traditional and Pagan divides, even in the work of feminist in religion. WATER (<http://www.his.com/~mhunt/>) in Silver Spring, MD, is one good place that does this. Rita

Posted: 2005-12-15 13:54:37

Ellora: Also, in your work, have you been able to interact with progressive faith based women's groups of non Christian religions, especially Islamic? If yes, what were the impressions you came back with? If no, why not?

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: In interviews I have done with religious women activists in the US, I've found that women from non-Christian religions often bring a particularly strong emphasis on justice and the need to remedy oppression to their community activism. For many, this approach stems from a combination of their religious values and their experience as minorities in the United States. Many have experienced discrimination. Many also see their religions as important to their cultural and historical identities, more strongly and explicitly than (for example) white Christians, at least in the interviews I did.

Islamic women have experienced a great deal of oppression and fear in their communities since 9/11. In fact, many of the Islamic women I spoke with were galvanized into action because of a need to define themselves visibly rather than be defined by stereotypes in the period since then.

Islamic and other non-Christian women at times describe being stuck in the middle. They can be criticized by members of their community if they speak out for women's rights--they are often accused of dividing their communities by doing so. But they also frequently feel unwelcomed by secular feminists.

Again, I think the experiences of non-Christian, and often non-white, women in the United States speaks to the need for real listening to how women think about their lives, their concerns, and their values. Islamic women for example are often stereotyped as oppressed, but many are working on behalf of their communities, and often women in their communities, in very pro-feminist ways. And they often root this work very explicitly in their religious values.

Posted: 2005-12-15 14:00:21

Celia Winkler: I do get the sense that there is a growing interest in combining feminism and social justice activism with faith perspectives. I know of a few organizations, such as the Network for Progressive Spirituality, that make this a focus. Are there others?

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: Shameless plug: Both Rita and I are involved in organizations working to do just this. My organization, IWPR, is currently sponsoring a Working Group on Women's Public Vision devoted to strategizing about ways to do so. Rita's organization, Faith Voices for the Common Good, also articulates a feminist, social justice, and religious vision. You can link to both groups on this page. Both Rita and I have also been involved in conversations sponsored by the Women's Funding Network ([www.wfnet.org](http://www.wfnet.org)) among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim women about women, faith, and philanthropy. There are many others, as well as a variety of feminist theologians and religion scholars who work daily to bridge these worlds--I wish I could name them all here, but that gives you a small idea of the interest in this work.

Posted: 2005-12-15 14:06:06

Cari: I'm interested in the role of race and ethnicity in healing the mistrust between feminist and religious women activists. How do you foresee that change coming about based on race, etc.?

Rita Nakashima Brock, FVCG: Hi Cari, I am an Asian American/Hispanic Protestant feminist. I am also straight, well-educated, and middle class. I have tried to use my own forms of social privilege to understand barriers among women.

I have worked hard to move beyond the limits of my own heterosexism, which has helped me understand how so many white women cannot see beyond their race privilege. My experience among white feminists is that they are often unaware of how deep race privilege goes, even in the feminist community. When challenged about racism, they sometimes elide the question by talking about their victimization by gender. My Asian American feminist friends are often stunned by the behavior of white feminists, even when they are a minority in our group.

Examining privilege, in my experience, is hard work and has to be an act of constant vigilance, even within oneself.

I think it is going to take a long time and a lot of hard work to heal mistrust. White feminists seem often to wonder how to include women of color in their movement, but I see very few committing real time and energy to discovering our needs in struggling for racial justice, so they don't know us or our communities very well. But, then again, few women of color actually work across racial lines in each others' communities either. We all have limited time and resources, so we need to figure out how to be in coalition work and still get done what we need to. Coalition work happens when we are willing to call each other on our limits of vision, accept conflict as part of the process, and find ways to support each other in hanging in there during the really hard stuff.

Well, I have a lot more to say about this, but I see we are out of time.  
Rita

Posted: 2005-12-15 14:06:55

Diane: Do religious women and feminists really have that much in common? What is it that they have in common?

Amy Caiazza, IWPR: Hopefully our conversation today answered your question to some extent: I've seen a real commitment to improving

women's lives and communities among both religious women activists and feminist activists. Women's motivations and language often differ, but there is still a focus on working for a world that allows real agency and opportunity--moral, political, and economic--for us all. (For more on the vision of religious women activists, another shameless plug: see my recent publication, [The Ties That Bind.](#))

We're out of time, but thanks for all your great questions today. I hope we'll all continue this conversation!

Posted: 2005-12-15 14:15:51

Moderator: Moving Ideas thanks our panelists for participating in this important discussion about bridging the rift between religious women activists and feminist movements. To learn more about this issue and what you can do, check out the resources in the right column above.

To see past chats or to learn about upcoming chats, check out our [online discussions page](#).

-- *Diana, Moderator*

