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Penny Edgell Becker*

GROWING UP POST-FEMINIST

My encounter with sociology in general and the sociology of religion in particular began in college. In the 1980s, in that part of the Princeton sociology department that I experienced directly, feminism was taken for granted in a way that I encountered as positive. The push for more adequate categories of analysis that capture the gendered nature of social life, including religious groups and experiences, was part of the discourse of lectures and small-group discussions. Functionalism, with its easy assumption that current social arrangements make a larger whole that is if not "right" at least inevitable, had been replaced by a conflict view of society, sensitive to power imbalances, multiple perspectives, and opposing interests (Collins 1975).

And then I went to graduate school. The University of Chicago in the late 1980s and early 1990s was characterized by several inter-woven strands of post-feminism. (A few of my friends insisted it was still pre-feminist, having been skipped over by the revolution.) Post-feminism is also a way of taking feminism for granted. But instead of asking feminist questions as a matter of course, post-feminism incorporates some of the insights about social life and power arrangements of feminist discourse without making them an explicit focus of analysis and debate. My encounter with post-feminism was less uniformly positive.

One strand of post-feminism is the idea that feminism as a social movement, having pushed us towards a more egalitarian society (which is self-evidently a good thing, and for which we are all of course grateful), is now essentially over, and the radicalism associated with it has been appropriately replaced by approaches to gender that seek consensus and value men's experiences. (We've grown; Deepak Chopra meet Robert Bly.) In learning how to do fieldwork, my insistence that gender be brought centrally into the account as a social location

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which constructs more than one "insider's view" was met with a reply of, "Isn't that just good fieldwork? Taking into account multiple points of view?" along with the assurance that, "Men have gender, too." In quantitative analysis, the equivalent was including sex as a standard variable in statistical analyses.

Another kind of post-feminism involved a building on and extending of the insights of an earlier generation of second-wave feminists. I remember Martin Riesebrodt's (1993) analysis of patriarchy as a personalistic system of power that constructs male-to-male, adult-to-child, and private-to-public status relations as well as those between men and women. And at a gender and society workshop I was pushed, for the first time, to go beyond the assumptions of a white, liberal, middle-class feminism to think more critically about other relationships of power.

However, I also remember classmates hostile to critiques of religious institutions as fundamentally patriarchal, who insisted that by making that critique I was devaluing women's own lived experiences of religion as meaningful. We had a hard time talking. They were drawing upon a neo-liberal view of agency, similar to that found in the work of people like Gary Becker and compatible with Coleman's view of the social actor,[1] which made no room for agency as socially constructed in a way that is simultaneously enabling and constraining. By definition, women participate in religious institutions because they want to do so, because their needs are met; criticizing these choices seems at best patronizing and at worst undemocratic. While I do believe we are all in one sense agents, I do not share the view of agency upon which they were basing their either/or dichotomy[2] (agents in this neo-liberal tradition either striding through history unencumbered or else being unjustly oppressed by any form of constraint — including the critiques of liberal feminist academics). In my "agency is more complicated than that" argument, they read a straightforward hegemony theory which was not there, thinking that I meant women suffered from some pernicious form of "false consciousness." We talked past each other, in part because I did not yet have the theoretical tools to make my case clearly.

In this kind of environment, post-feminism confronts the young feminist as something of a briar patch to be negotiated with care. How can one object to fieldwork practices that are more sensitive to point-of-view, to insiders and outsiders-within, without sounding churlish? Or object to including a variable

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[1] See pp. 28-29 in Coleman's *Foundations of social theory*, where actors are defined as one of the two elements of a social system — the other element being resources over which actors have control or in which they have an interest. Constraint is not part of the definition, and power is not a feature of the relationship between two actors or a property of the system, but resides within the actor (see pp. 132ff.). This is similar to a neoclassical economist's understanding of agency; when applied to relationships within the family, for example, such an approach leaves no room for a critical discussion of systematic imbalances of power that affect individuals' within-family negotiations (e.g., Becker 1981).

[2] For this contrasting view of agency see Giddens (1979).

for sex (plus interaction terms) in statistical models? These are not bad things to do, surely. They only frustrated me because I encountered them as boundaries; doing these things, it was implied, one could not reasonably be expected to go further or do more.

With a few exceptions, it was generally difficult to talk about how our theoretical apparatus might itself privilege a masculine — or masculinist — point of view, in an atmosphere where even James Coleman[3] could say to me, a first-year student, at a Friday post-colloquium reception, "I think all the interesting things have been written about gender, don't you? I mean, it's not really worth while spending time on gender as an entire category of analysis, there's nothing theoretically interesting there, don't you agree?" And it was hard to talk with other feminists who were only too ready to assume that anyone in the avowedly positivist sociology department must be tone-deaf to their concerns, if not downright hostile. My defense of some forms of positivism, along with my relatively feminine presentation of self (complete with jewelry and lipstick), did not allay their concerns.

My response to Professor Coleman at the reception set a pattern which I repeated more than once during graduate school. I was appalled, but smiled and said something polite about not really knowing enough yet to be sure, before I made my escape to think about things on my own. This is somewhat surprising to me still, since I soon obtained a well-deserved reputation within my cohort of being combative in seminars and colloquia. But I did not feel sure enough of my own feminism to fight over that. A pragmatist, I decided I could confront those questions as they arose in my own work, at my own pace.

The result was that, while I would readily self-identify as a feminist, I was not really sure what that meant for my work. I read quite a bit more feminist theory, incorporating that into my own knowledge framework under the larger category of critical theories.[4] In my dissertation, some feminist questions emerged. I explored how congregations negotiated with both a religious logic of caring for the believer and a religious logic of authoritative moral judgment in adjudicating conflicts over gender and sexuality (Becker 1997). An understanding of how congregations orient themselves differently to "the public" and "the private" informed my arguments about why group process and moral argument play out differently across congregations (Becker 1998, 1999). But I did not use an explicit feminist theoretical framework to analyze where these different ideas — about private and public, about caring and authoritative judgment — originate. Nor did I explore their consequences for the gendering of local

[3] A brilliant man, who actively fostered some forms of faculty and graduate student work on gender and status outcomes.

[4] That is, I understood feminism as one of many ways of making power central in the analysis of social life (cf., Agger 1998; Reinharz 1991).

religious culture. I wrote a post-feminist dissertation and book, without giving it much thought, a boundary encountered in practice, perceived only after-the-fact.

RELIGION AND FAMILY

In designing a new project on the links between religion and family, based on surveys and fieldwork in four upstate New York communities, some questions flowed, quite literally, from my previous work in Oak Park. In 1993, when I asked pastors and lay leaders to name the most important issues they would confront over the next few years, the most common response by far had to do with changes in work and family. How were they going to restructure programming to include working women? How were they going to minister to single parents, divorced persons, those struggling with custody issues?

In a community dominated by young professionals, extended family networks were attenuated or missing for many. People were turning to congregations to be that extended family, a challenge congregations found variously invigorating or threatening, depending on their resources and sense of mission. One Reform Rabbi feared being swamped by "needy people" who would draw the congregation inward, toward members' own emotional healing, sapping their energy for outwardly-oriented peace and justice ministries. The pastor of the fundamentalist Baptist church saw new family needs as a natural extension of their prior forms of ministry, and enthusiastically organized fellowship groups for single parents and divorced persons. Pastors in upstate New York in 1999 ask similar questions, but they also employ a new discourse about the "time squeeze" effects on religious involvement, as they encounter families juggling competing work and activity schedules for parent(s) and children, including alternate-weekend custody arrangements and soccer leagues that hold practices on Sunday morning (Becker and Hofmeister 1999; Becker and Dhingra 2000).

In this new project, I have tried to push myself to ask how post-feminism has influenced both my own perspective and the previous sociological work on family and religion that I have encountered. I do not have the space here to render a complete account of that internal dialogue, nor do I have final answers to questions about the usefulness of a post-feminist interpretation of religion and family. But there are some silences that I have become determined to fill in, if I can, and sharing those may be useful to others thinking through similar issues.

Some of the silences in the literature on religion and family have to do with the way that these are both generally conceptualized as "private" institutions. Christiano's (2000) recent review shows that much of the religion-and-family literature takes for granted Berger's (1967) argument that religion has thrived in our society because of its mutually-reinforcing relationship with the family, both of which have been relegated, through modernization, to the private sphere of life (cf., Houseknecht and Pankhurst 2000). Religious institutions have powerful

effects on marital formation and stability, on parenting behavior and the socialization of children, on marital satisfaction, on regulating sexual behavior to enforce norms of monogamous marriage, on married women's labor-force participation, and on the development of "familistic" ideologies (cf., Sherkat and Ellison 1999).

Religion is understood as private in the religion-and-family literature in several mutually reinforcing senses of that word. A voluntary institution, it is embraced or rejected by choice. It operates inside the heads of individuals, influencing individual behavior and beliefs. And it is private in that its most basic provenance is the sustenance of certain forms of what have traditionally been considered private life, the life of family and interpersonal relationships (Lasch 1991).

Sometimes, of course, religious groups "go public" in the form of inspiring publicly-visible utopian subcultures which critique the larger society, or in the form of religiously-based social movements on issues such as abortion and birth-control, or in the public statements of religious leaders about what constitutes a good family.[5] But this activity is generally seen as an attempt to impose upon public discourse values that originate in the private sphere. Even though the spheres are "bridged" by such activity, the idea that public and private are distinct, and that religion is most centrally located in the private, remains intact in such treatments.

In the sociology of religion, family is simply assumed to be private, although most acknowledge that families produce "public goods" in the form of well-socialized children, and through drawing parents into relationships that generate social capital (D'Antonio 1983, 1980; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; cf., Becker and Hofmeister 1999; Cherlin 1996; Parcel and Menaghan 1994). While I have always understood religious institutions as public, I did once share the assumption that the dividing line between "the private" and "the public" is coterminous with the boundary of the family.

So I was surprised when pastors from Unitarian and American Baptist churches, in an early focus group for the Religion and Family Project, talked about the public implications of organizing a church's ministry around a two-parent, heterosexual family, of giving a religious imprimatur to norms of family practice that seem increasingly out of place in what Furstenberg (1999) has called the era of the post-modern family. Around 20 percent of the pastors in our clergy survey, almost all liberal Protestant, said they do not use the term "family ministry" at all because it is exclusionary, echoing in their open-ended responses some of the

[5] For work that describes how religious groups "go public" on family issues, see Bellah *et al.* (1991); Christiano (2000); Demerath and Williams (1992); Ginsburg (1998); Hunter (1991); and Luker (1984). Of course, outside of the religion-and-family literature, there are more general treatments of religion as a public institution; see for example Casanova (1994) or Marty (1997). For a critique of the Casanova thesis see Bruce (1996). For an explicit critique of Berger's thesis see Warner (1993); for an historical overview Warner (1999).

themes from the focus group. This led me to examine more seriously my assumptions about the "private" family, and I sought out colleagues to find out more about approaches to the family that take its "publicness" for granted.

It is not that the religion-and-family literature is wrong about the substance of the relationship between religion and family. But it does, I think, ignore the feminist understanding of the private *as political*, along with the feminist understanding of the family as itself a public institution, structured in large part by the state and the economy, mediating between individuals and a host of other institutions. As a result, a boundary is erected between sociologists of religion and others who study the family from a human development, feminist theory, or gender-and-work perspective. The latter, who usually have an explicit feminist commitment, often ignore religion entirely or assume that any religious influence on family life is harmful to women.[6]

This approach also leads to some silences within the sociology of religion, where attempts to answer feminist questions have a kind of awkwardness that comes from starting with a framework that accepts the family as a private realm of individual freedom and self-expression. Stacey and Gerard (1990) raise an oft-repeated question when they ask why any modern woman would embrace a conservative religion (specifically evangelical Protestantism). They answer it by arguing that these groups are not, in effect, as oppressive to women as feminists have supposed. Clearly beginning with a goal of making a straightforward critique of these groups as patriarchal, they end up making a sharp distinction between rhetoric and practice; in the latter, they find a kind of pragmatic egalitarianism ameliorating an ideology that symbolicly affirms male "headship" in the home.[7]

I always confront these studies with some surprise — not at the evangelicals, but at the feminists. I grew up in an evangelical Protestant environment, and am not surprised to find that the very strong women I remember were not "oppressed" in the sense some scholars seem to expect them to have been. And I am sympathetic to arguments that not privileging long-term career attainment over family-oriented goals is not in itself anti-feminist, and that to equate the two bespeaks the biases of a white, middle-class feminism that may not apply so well

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[6] Recent reviews of literature in several areas of research on the family and family and work do not mention religion at all or treat it with only the briefest of passing mentions; see for example Cherlin (1996), and Shelton and John (1996) on the division of household labor, or Spain and Bianchi's (1996) review of recent research on changes in marriage, motherhood, and women's employment.

[7] For a recent review of the works on evangelical Protestantism see Christiano (1999) or Woodbury and Smith (1998), and for some good recent exemplars see Brasher (1998), Manning (1999), and Wilcox (1999). See Bendroth (1993), who argues that this characterization of conservative Protestants (as having symbolic male headship but practical equality) does not apply to fundamentalist Protestants, who are also quite patriarchal in practice. See McDannell (1995) for a distinction between a masculinist "official" Catholicism and a more home-centered and woman-friendly Catholic popular culture, and Davidman (1991) for an examination of women's roles in conservative Jewish groups.

across economic and ethnic boundaries. I am not calling for a feminist analysis of conservative religious groups that views the women within them as having no agency or as having a kind of "false consciousness" underlying their experiences of religion and family as satisfying and positively self-expressive.

But I do think there should be a place for feminist critiques of religion that are not apologetic, that treat issues of power relationships within marriage and family as inherently public, and that move past a pre-occupation with conservative religious subcultures to focus attention on a wider range of questions. Most self-confidently feminist treatments of religion and family have to do with issues like domestic violence, about which one expects no serious disagreement with the proposition that anything encouraging such behavior is bad (Nason-Clark 1997). But post-feminism has forsaken any theoretical ground from which to address issues of power in areas upon which there is no such taken-for-granted feminist consensus.

This way of thinking about the world sets boundaries around the kinds of questions that are even asked in the literature on religion and family, leading to systematic silences. Is the familism of mainstream (moderate and liberal) religious groups good for women, children, and men? It leads, research shows, to stable (even faithful) marriages, to satisfaction in family relationships, to well-adjusted children. In short, it is functional. Again, one would seem churlish to rail against such positive outcomes; it is rather like attacking kittens or chocolate, self-evident goods.

On the other hand, more women than men report feelings of stress and anxiety over balancing work and family, report high levels of guilt regarding their relationship with their children, and report having no free time for themselves. Does religiously-based familism support the idea that problems which arise in managing work and family life are disproportionately women's problems, for which they are responsible for providing private, individual-level solutions?[8] I never hear that question asked, perhaps because those doing the asking tend to come from within a mainstream religious tradition, or at least from the socio-economic location from which it springs. Hence, "the other" (evangelicals, fundamentalists, "marginal" religions[9]) prove sociologically interesting, while groups closer to home remain relatively unexamined.

There are other kinds of silences, too. In the face of new forms of family that are radically different than the male-breadwinner couple around which the last great religious expansion was built,[10] are churches of all kinds changing what

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[8] For a brief review see Becker and Moen (1999); Spain and Bianchi (1996) have a much longer review, as does Hays (1996).

[9] See Wessinger (1993).

[10] For reviews see Warner (1962) or Ellwood (1997).

they define as a good family? A few are questioning the idea of "the family" as the fundamental organizing unit of local ministry, and are including the rising numbers of long-term singles and childless persons in local religious life.[11] But these congregations exist in the same communities where other lay leaders and pastors still complain about the volunteer shortage that occurred, about 20 years ago now, when women "went to work;" these congregations are still struggling to find new forms of programming for women, children, and men that meet contemporary needs.

The huge variation in how congregational leaders think and talk about these issues has prompted me to ask how changes in men's and women's relationships at work, in the family, and in the church have transformed the gendering of local congregations. It has also made me question the link between changes in work and family and the proliferation of alternative religious spaces, including those like the Promise Keepers which focus explicitly on reclaiming a masculine Christianity. Has the "pluralization" of the family, as Furstenberg (1999) or Skolnick (1991) might call it, driven the pluralization of local religious cultures? Or the pluralization of commitment styles? Research has focused on the "gender gap" in women's and men's church attendance (Hertel 1995). But I want to ask if the *meaning* of religious involvement has changed for men and women after a period of rapid change in the work and family roles around which so many congregations have been organized for the past 45 years.

In raising these questions, I am only at the beginning of figuring out what a more positive kind of post-feminist account of religion and family might look like, and so have no compelling summary to offer, let alone a call to a specific research agenda. In my own work, I do want to take some feminist insights for granted. But I explicitly reject the idea that strong feminist critiques have had their day and must now give way gracefully to approaches that favor a consensual and functional, or even communitarian, interpretation of the good society. I am feeling more combative, or at least constructively critical, about theories that neatly divide society into a "public" and a "private" realm, while systematically devaluing those feminine things (religion, family) assigned to the private (cf., Warner 1999). I am not sure where it will lead, but it feels right to begin pushing back the boundaries of post-feminism by asking a different set of questions.

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[11] For a review of the demographic changes see Treas (1999) or Furstenberg (1999). A few studies of individual congregations exist; for example, see Demmitt (1992) and Marler (1995).

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