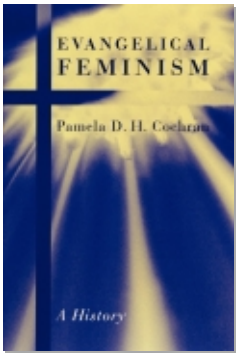
7. Conclusion



7 Conclusion

In telling the history of evangelical feminism, I have sought to do two things. First, I wanted to tell the story of a group of marginalized yet significant women in the history of American religion. This account is particularly important because evangelicalism has been such a considerable force in American history. Second, I hoped to discover what role, if any, feminists in evangelicalism have played in changes occurring within their own community and beyond. To answer this, I have traced the development of evangelical feminism, focusing on its theology and view of biblical authority and on its leading organizations and their social agenda.

Contrary to the claim of Rosemary Radford Ruether on the opening page of this book, the narrative of evangelical feminism has shown that feminist theology can come from the existing base of the Christian Bible. With a theological rigor that has largely been ignored by theologians and scholars of American religion, evangelical feminists have demonstrated that even in conservative Protestantism, women are more than just the majority of congregants sitting in the pew or serving (male) leaders of the church.

At the center of evangelical feminist theology is the question of biblical authority, its nature, meaning, and scope. From the beginning, biblical feminists addressed this issue because of a desire to convince their fellow evangelicals that the Bible, not just secular society or liberal philosophies, teaches the equality of men and women in the home, church, and society. To do this, they had to take the authority of the Bible seriously and show that those who taught women's subordination had been misinterpreting scripture.

It was as a result of these theological efforts that evangelical feminists helped change the face of American evangelicalism. Since evangelicals do not have the same kind of authoritative bodies that other religious com-

munities have, they have resorted to recognizing informal boundaries regarding how to approach the Bible and social mores, based on particular conceptions of biblical authority and methods of interpretation that restrict the conclusions that can be drawn from the text. In attempting to reinterpret passages traditionally considered to restrict women, evangelical feminists have used modern hermeneutical methods based on a modified definition of inerrancy. Both their social agenda and their methods put them in the vanguard of young evangelicals who helped make acceptable a more culturally relevant, less fundamentalist, style of evangelicalism.[1] Theologically, evangelical feminists helped shift the boundary of evangelicalism away from a strict definition of inerrancy toward the infallibility of scripture and hermeneutics. Socially, evangelical boundaries remain focused on gender roles, but biblical feminists have questioned the traditional definition of family by challenging hierarchialist interpretations that subordinate women to men in the home and church.

The account of evangelical feminism, however, also speaks to larger issues beyond their immediate community, related to the development of two distinct theologies and their concomitant social agendas. These two theologies, one progressive and one traditionalist, are based on competing conceptions of biblical authority. Initially, primarily one organization, the Evangelical Women's Caucus, represented those in the biblical feminist movement. However, as the issue of lesbianism arose in the group, the contested nature of biblical authority became evident and led to the creation of a second organization, the Christians for Biblical Equality. As its name change indicates, the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus developed a more inclusive view of biblical authority that rejected the social, hermeneutical, and textual constraints of the evangelical community. In this it reveals the impact of modern ideals such as pluralism, consumerism, and individualism on American religion and in society more broadly. Specifically, as a variety of religious perspectives come in contact with one another in a context in which the authority of the individual has superseded revealed authority, faith no longer makes an exclusive claim on the life of a believer. Faith has become personal, individualistic, and pluralistic. Instead of directing the actions and beliefs of its adherents, traditional religion becomes just one more alternative to serve the needs of the individual, and moral agency is determined by individual preference rather than by a transcendent point of reference.

Furthermore, progressive evangelical feminists illustrate that the nature of religious pluralism in America is changing. Several historians and

sociologists of religion have argued that America has long been pluralist, meaning that a diversity of religious views has been tolerated.[2] Although Protestant Christianity may have had a numerical advantage, there always have been alternative religions in America. Quakers, Puritans, Deists, Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Jews, and other religious traditions have existed, though not always amicably, alongside one another since the first days of American settlement. Some scholars contend, however, that historians have focused on Protestantism to the exclusion of these other faiths so that America has appeared more uniform than it has been in reality.

Surely, though, there is this truth in the consensus histories: In America's past, although other faiths existed alongside evangelicalism, it is the latter that wielded the dominant influence on American society, and pluralism was defined as the toleration of a wide diversity of religious faiths. Since America's earliest days, religion—particularly that historical strain called evangelicalism, which can be traced from the Puritans through revivalism to modern evangelicalism—has played an influential role in the expression and shaping of American cultural values. Mark Noll has argued that from the very beginning of the American republic, public thought and religious life have influenced each other and moved in tandem, particularly in their stress on individual freedom, confidence in the capacity of human reason, and attentiveness to market realities. Other historians also have documented a similar symbiosis during specific historical periods. Puritan historians detailed the power of religious images to motivate the early colonists to create a "city on a hill," which would have a sacred mission to enlighten other nations with biblical values.[3] Those values included a sense of destiny, "chosenness," the operation of a "higher law," and the opportunity for the free play of the individual. Historian Nathan Hatch pointed out that during the early days of the American republic, the inclusion of the ideal of liberty in religion led to a fundamental reordering of the principles that governed American civil order.[4] William McLoughlin contended that religious awakenings in America from the early eighteenth to the nineteenth century were the shaping power of American culture, acting as the means by which American values could be transferred from one period in American history to another.[5] Because its influence was so pervasive, historian Sydney Ahlstrom described revivalism and evangelicalism as the established religion of America until the contemporary era.[6]

In these earlier periods of American history until today, pluralism was defined as religious people identifying with a particular faith tradition to which they were bound. Thus, in the past, Americans could choose among religions. In contemporary America, however, people no longer choose from a variety of faith alternatives such as between Catholicism and Protestantism, evangelicalism and mainline Protestantism, or Judaism and Christianity. Instead, Americans choose among religious alternatives and come up with their own spirituality. Even those who identify with a particular faith tradition no longer feel bound to its strictures, instead forming their own opinions on social and theological issues. This "pluralization" is substantively different from that in earlier periods in American history.[7]

Traditionalist evangelical feminists have not been left unaffected by modern culture, although less so than their progressive counterparts have. The traditionalist biblical feminists continue to be exclusive in their faith beliefs and the authority of scripture. Accordingly, they remain inside the boundaries of the larger evangelical movement and continue to reach its members with their message of biblical egalitarianism. The exclusivity of traditionalist evangelical feminism also enables it to offer a more robust alternative to secular feminism. For just as the exclusivity of evangelicalism sets it apart from secular American culture, the exclusive nature of traditionalist evangelical feminism sets it apart from a secular feminism that drifts without a foundation outside women's experience on which to ground it. Still, the impact of a consumerist, therapeutic culture can be seen in the way that traditionalist evangelical feminism focuses on using the Bible to meet the perceived needs of the individual and in its reliance on individual reason to judge the truth of scripture, without the assistance of an institutional and historical church. This trend, which emphasizes individual preference and rationality, indicates that even in evangelicalism, religious authority has been minimized. The irony, of course, is that American evangelicals base their identity on the concept of transcendent authority and have fought against American individualism and pluralism.[8]

The history of evangelical feminism reveals that although American evangelicalism will undoubtedly continue to survive and grow in its modern, even postmodern, environment expressly because it has kept its symbolic theological and social boundaries largely intact and remained exclusive in its faith claims, it is nonetheless eroding. The trends among

evangelical feminists that emphasize individual preference and rationalism indicate that modern ideals of pluralism and individualism have made a greater impact on American religion than previously acknowledged, thereby reducing the scope and force of religious authority in American society.

What is more, the story of evangelical feminism suggests that evangelicalism may have inadvertently contributed to the loss of its own dominance in contemporary American society, by not challenging its culture when it was the dominant religious perspective, but by fitting into it so well. Owing to its voluntary nature, democratic tendencies, anti-institutionalism, and dominance of the American scene, evangelicalism is quite compatible with an increasingly individualized, commodified culture. For this reason, evangelicalism has helped shape a new pluralization in which individual choice and preference are fundamental and individuals choose among a variety of faith perspectives. It is pluralization, not evangelicalism, that is now the dominant fact of American religion. Religion and faith are not at risk of being destroyed by modernism in American society; however, the binding nature of those faiths are at risk, and evangelicalism, despite its own apparent health, has participated in the destruction of the acceptance of faith (of all kinds) as binding.

This conclusion gives reason for both hope and caution in regard to American religion and society: historically, the Christian faith, if not its institutions, has often thrived when it has been persecuted or been in the minority. The weakening of traditional, institutional faith portends, however, a weakening of community ties and moral commitments based on more than personal preference, which bodes ill for the practice of civil life in America today. Future studies would do well to consider in greater depth how forces of modernity, such as scientific rationalism, technology, and advanced capitalism, have unintentionally affected American religion and society.[9]