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Sharing the Theological Hopes of First Wave (Suffrage) Feminists

2011 was an important year to Norwegians – a year of hope and crisis. The Arabic spring took place in Egypt and Tunisia as crowds of young people assembled in the streets, men and women together, demanding equality and democracy. Their peaceful movements pre-figured emancipation (to come) from authoritarian society. Five months later, the Occupy movement took to the financial streets of New York to set up a camp community, organise general assemblies, and by means of direct action, demand reform of the economic and social orders. The Occupy movement rapidly spread – to London, Madrid, Hong Kong, although manifest results of its utopian politics are still to come.

In between events in Cairo and New York, on 22 July 2011, Norway experienced the opposite: a terrorist attack. A white Norwegian took to the streets of Oslo, placed a homemade bomb outside the government building, and then drove his car to fetch a ferry over to the Utøya Island, where almost 600 members of the Social Democratic Party's youth organisation were gathered for summer camp. With his own hands (pistol and gun), Anders Behring Breivik killed 69 kids (77 died altogether, including in the government quarter). The massacre is the biggest attack on Norway since World War II. The perpetrator legitimised his actions by publishing a 1,500 page manifest on the internet. The text contains a critique of liberal democracy as we know it and a plea for a return to a non-democratic, authoritarian, patriarchal, ethnically segregated Christian state. His deeper mission is to save the values of white, Nordic masculinity and the honor of true Norwegian men, who supposedly are threatened by the politics of Muslim labor immigration, multiculturalism, and feminism.¹

¹ For more on the terrorist attack, see REDO project, <http://www.tf.uio.no/english/research/projects/redo/>, and Jone Salomonsen, "Graced Life After All? Terrorism and Theology on July 22, 2011," in: *Dialog – A Journal of Theology*, Vol 54, Issue 3 (9/2015), 249-259. (<http://www.>

In his critique, Breivik attacks the whole idea of egalitarianism, which in short means that he rebukes the full acceptance of the plurality of human morphology, sexuality, and subjectivity – as specifically felt or integrated into individual bodies – as a human birthright. As a first principle, equality is derived from the belief that all human beings are created in the Image of God and are therefore equalised as God’s children. Instead of invoking this heritage line, Breivik returns to populist versions of Aristotle’s old ideas that not all are fully human: there are naturally born slaves and there are naturally born women. These creatures are secondary – they are inferior, owned and meant to serve.²

Feminism as a social movement, aiming at altering law and custom, is less than 200 years old. Since its inception in the early nineteenth century, it has developed in what is known as “waves,” depending on what was at stake, and the various strategies to “mobilise” women from a not-fully-human to an equal human state. Although a backlash on feminism had already been announced in the 1980’s, and was followed by the argument that people had had enough, that society could not handle more gender-bending norms without losing sight of the “real” distinction between male and female, nobody could have imagined a backlash in the format of male cries for sheer patriarchy and totalitarianism in combination with violence and terror.

The Norwegian terrorist represents, of course, a tiny minority in our part of the world, and he is an outcast in terms of his methods, his killings. But his dystopian vision of a return to a pre-1848 civil state (revolution of the Paris commune) and a new bondage of women to tradition under the authority of men, is in itself a reason for theologians, as well as the Church, to get reacquainted with the whys and hows of the rise of the early feminist movement. First Wave Feminists struggled for rights which many of us today take for granted. Furthermore, women’s fight for their own emancipation was inter-linked with the anti-slavery movement, or in fact, historically, grew out of this movement.³

First Wave feminism, or suffrage feminism, as a social and political movement, started internationally in the 1830’s and 1840’s almost simultaneously in the United States, England, France, and Germany. Critique of women’s

tf.uio.no/english/research/projects/redo/redo-publications/salomonsen-2015-dialog.pdf, 6 May 2016)

² Aristotle, *Politiken* (Paul Åströms förlag: Jonsered 1993).

³ Estelle. B. Freedman (ed.), *The Essential Feminist Reader* (Modern Library: New York 2007).

ontological and social subordination in society and Church had of course been promoted by free-spirit thinkers for centuries, and was, for example, loudly present during the French Revolution. But “the woman question” did not evolve from merely being the topic of individual authors’ radical thinking and agitation (or from civilised salon discussions) into an organised political movement until the nation-state became a reality, a form of representative democracy was established, and the bourgeois public became split over the question of who really constituted the people of the democracy: Who was to be included in democracy’s vision of an autonomous people? Who belonged to this radically new category, and who did not? Who were free and equal “brothers” and worthy of the vote? Who could rationally represent the whole, the people, in the new democratic representative institutions?

The United States of America was the first modern republic constituted as a democracy, and the “woman question” was from early on an important ingredient in U.S. American debates on democracy and voting rights. Its driving forces were both women and men, many of whom were Quakers, radical Protestants, and religious freethinkers. What distinguished them from the contemporary 19th century Norwegian experience is that most U.S. American suffragists had been active in the struggle against slavery. This experience in itself was an integral part of how and why they turned to feminism.⁴

The U.S. American anti-slavery movement, the so-called abolitionists, became a distinct public voice during the 1770s. It was closely associated with the struggle for independence from British colonial rule and a yearning for new governance, and slowly built a large following. As part of their struggle, the reformers educated the citizenry about what slavery actually was, criticised churches’ slave-legitimising Bible interpretation, and appealed to people’s conscience to rethink right and wrong. They also organised practical run-away assistance to plantation slaves through the so-called “Underground Railroad”.⁵ Many U.S. American women got involved in this sometimes dangerous work and learned at the same time to mobilise and advocate for noble political and moral causes in general.

In 1831, the movement was formalised into the “American Anti-Slavery Society”. Discussions immediately started over the appropriate roles of women and men, and their proximate relations: Could they belong to the same

⁴ Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds.), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Palgrave MacMillan: UK 2005).

⁵ *Ibid.*

association? Was it respectable? Could women speak at general meetings and to the public? Could they vote, hold positions, and act as leaders? A lot of women were radicalised by the resistance they met in these so-called emancipatory circles and began to see a clearer link between slavery, racism, class division, economic exploitation, and their own gendered non-citizenship in a burgeoning new democracy. The first national gathering of women that explicitly addressed the problems was held in Seneca Falls, upstate New York, in 1848.⁶

Why was it so difficult to get rid of slavery? And how were arguments that defended slavery linked with arguments that kept women in place? In both cases, we are confronted with questions about nature and the belief that some people are not fully-human but eternally born with a second-class nature, at least when compared to the adult white male prototype, “the” human person.

If we start by taking a closer look at the concepts and arguments in the United States “Declaration of Independence” from 1776, we must first acknowledge the Declaration’s originality. This document is the first repudiation ever of inborn differences between people that had been negotiated as a statement collectively and in public. Also, the Declaration summarised sentiments already manifested in actions.⁷ The thirteen British colonies along the Atlantic coast broke their filiations with the British Empire and declared themselves a union of independent states on 4 July 1776. Instead of demanding reform from King George and the unpopular British rule, the colonies breached off and formulated a new representative government by and for the people. But the process had been going on for a long time and was fully in accord with Enlightenment ideals. The Declaration typically started by affirming the right of U.S. Americans to a “separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them.” Then, and in respect for “the opinions of mankind,” they declared and explained why egalitarianism was a natural right:

We hold....that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit

⁶ Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity. From the Reformation to the 21st Century (Volume III)* (Orbis: New York 2003).

⁷ Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution. The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (Penguin: New York 2005); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1992).

of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.⁸

The freedom to develop a new sort of governance was proclaimed to be the sovereign right of the people since governments obtain all their legitimacy from “the consent of the governed,” and not from inherited traditions, nor from any God.

The U.S. American judgment of British colonial power was in 1776 merciless: “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over [America].”⁹ To prove the claim, a number of “facts” were presented to “a candid world.” The aim of these explications was to educate the thinking of individuals and of states, not to offer prayers to a higher power or to God the Almighty. Yet, the British refused to be “educated,” and the War of Independence (or the Revolutionary War) lasted for six years. With France’s military assistance, the United States of America finally won, and on 30 September 1783, the Paris Agreement was signed. Four years later, on 17 September 1787, and two years before the French Revolution (1789), the “Declaration of Independence” could be replaced by the “US Constitution,” and the world’s first modern democracy became a reality. Like the Norwegian constitution, it is one of the oldest in the world still in use.

The alternative vision of the founding U.S. American fathers was not a secular instead of a religious one, but rather to conceptualise all forms of authority horizontally instead of vertically. By invoking phenomenological knowledge of “life itself” as can be observed and acknowledged by anyone, the men of the revolution turned the nature argument on its head. Instead of using nature to sort people hierarchically into biologically explained classes and casts, they now used the argument to tear down divides and promote kinship and equality. Being born of female womb equalised being born similarly and equally, and meant to have inherited the same natural rights. Being born was, in other words, the same as being created by God. This allowed for a

⁸ *The United States Declaration of Independence*. (http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html, 3 April 2016)

⁹ *Ibid.*

radically new anthropology in the conception of the state and gave weight to birthright as a new, legal principle.

Yet, women's freedom requested that even the basics of spiritual brotherly kinship and similitude were challenged. According to political scientist Carole Pateman, liberal democracy means that society is no longer based on a duplication of the house and its clan structures, with a "king" at the top, but is constituted as a contract between equal parties.¹⁰ In liberal thinking, modern society is the result of representative public negotiation, not the power to give orders in a lineage. Democracy's self-understanding is therefore that the "natural" powers of the fathers have given way to brotherhood and its "natural" egalitarianism as society's basic principle. Brotherhood, in other words, is what distinguishes modern from pre-modern societies. The power of Birthright invoked in the United States "Declaration of Independence," where a male person is entitled to his rights regardless of whether he is recognised as the son of a particular father, is thus radically different from, for example, Roman law, where the paterfamilias was the sovereign entity exactly because of his power to decide over a son's life and death.

Yet, contract society did not mean that patriarchy disappeared; only that it took on a new form. Carole Pateman clearly believes that the new distinction between public and private, implicit in a modern contract society, was crucial for the transformation of patriarchy. The distinction makes it possible for a state to have two sets of norms for society at the same time: a democratic, negotiated norm set for public policy on the one hand, and a private, authoritarian norm set for the home sphere on the other. While the brotherhood principle governs the public domain, the authoritarian-father institution of the past can continue its old hegemony in the home (albeit in modified form, as for example when social democratic political legislation interferes in the internal affairs of home and forbids corporal punishment of children).

The additional problem for theology is that it is still unclear whether the Church" or "House of the Lord belongs to the protected private sphere and can continue to be organised as a pre-modern ancestral institution (although it has to accept certain coercive reform elements as demanded by the state in all democratic nations, such as a minimum of employment rights); or if the Church really is a public institution that must change its constitution and be reformed when society reforms.

¹⁰ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press: Stanford 1988).

However, the “Women’s Rights Convention” in Seneca Falls in 1848 both copied and critiqued the regulatory text of the U.S. constitution. Women critiqued the fact that men in 1776 merely distributed equality between themselves, and that they only applied it to men of a certain race and social standing, that is, to taxpaying men with property and income. However, the prelude to the women’s meeting in 1848, and the reason why U.S. American suffragettes organised themselves into a separate political body and movement so quickly, was, in fact, the scandal at the “London Anti-Slavery Convention” in 1840. The two abolitionists, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, met as official U.S. delegates in London, but it turned out that the conference was only for men. The women could therefore neither participate in the assembly nor speak, but had to sit in a special gallery as observers and silently listen to the men’s debate. The famous Quaker woman, Lucretia Mott, was finally invited to give her prepared speech in the Unitarian Church. This was unheard news and the church was packed. The experience became a dramatic turning point for many. In her speech, Mott applied the abolitionists’ critique of slavery to women’s situation and to their lack of basic human birthrights. In doing so, Mott broke the years-long and tacit political agreement among radical anti-slavery reformers that emancipation of slaves had to be reached before freedom for women could become a public concern.¹¹

When Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton reinterpreted the U.S. Declaration of Independence at Seneca Falls in 1848, they simultaneously submitted a feminist version, the “Declaration of Sentiments (and Resolutions)” to the delegates. Way ahead of their time, they consistently used a gender inclusive language and extended their fight for freedom from British tyranny to include freedom from the rule of fathers. Although the text was modeled after the famous Declaration of Independence and systematically applied its famous analysis of human freedom to gender, the women did not call for gender separatism or asked other women to throw off fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons and withdraw to an alternative social world. Rather, they formulated women’s rights as reachable within a democratic framework.

In addition to replacing the generic “man” with a more inclusive “women and men,” descriptions of Kings’ despotism was replaced by patriarchal tyranny.¹² The Declaration of Sentiments reads: “The history of mankind is

¹¹ Malone, *Women and Christianity*.

¹² For the radicality of their thinking, see Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible (I-II)*, (1895-1898). (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/wmn/wb/>, 3 April 2016)

a history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”¹³ While Kings were tyrants in certain historical periods, men have always ruled over women, was the message. Thus, there is no “empty land” that women can flee to in order to cast off their patriarchal tyrants. Change must take place in the actual society.

To prove that their critique of patriarchy was correct, and also to contribute to the education of “a candid world,” the Declaration of Sentiments presented “numerous facts” about men’s oppression of women per 1848. It opened by critiquing men for having held back women’s “unalienable rights” and for keeping up marriage laws that almost made women a person’s property, and therefore “civilly dead.” It further expressed that men had monopolised all occupations, shut women out of school and education, given her a subordinate position both in Church and in state, and excluded her from the priesthood:

He allows her in Church as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry [...] He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.¹⁴

Like their “founding fathers,” and in line with the Protestant traditions, suffrage feminists appealed both to the authority of the heart’s inner voice and to the autonomy of conscience, including women’s conscience, and demanded that women too must decide which functions and tasks they should have or not have in society. To take up roles ascribed by their brethren and not themselves was considered nothing less than blasphemous. Alas, the equal-rights feminists in Seneca Falls started to criticise the brotherhood’s abuse of power by means of theological reinterpretations and referrals to enlightenment ideals. For not only was democracy closed to women, the democratic “person” was in reality constructed as a wealthy white man, against the word of “her God.” Slaves and women were perhaps people, partly in need of freedom, but not persons as in the meaning of “brother.” Consequently, the Declaration of Independence was critiqued for partiality, and therefore as merely tentative in authority. Of the more than three hundred delegates present in Seneca Falls, 68 women and 32 men signed the new Declaration of Sentiments in protest.

¹³ *Declaration of Sentiments (and Resolutions)*. (<http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/seneca.html>, 3 April 2016)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

There is intended ambiguity in the Declaration of Independence between the external God-principle invoked to anchor human equality, partly from above, and the internal, creative Human constructed-principle invoked to anchor abolishment and reinstatement of government, fully from below. To vivify the challenges posed by First Wave feminists, still unanswered by a majority of churches, I suggest that, as an exercise, we exchange “men” with “women and men,” “government” with “sacred texts” or “spiritual practices,” and “governed” with “worshipping community” in the following famous paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, and see where it takes us:

We hold... that all men and women [men] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, sacred texts and spiritual practices [Governments] are instituted among men and women [Men], deriving their just powers from the consent of the worshipping community [governed], – That whenever any (ecclesiastical) practice [Form of Government] become destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the worshipping community [People] to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new texts and new practices [Government].¹⁵

As we can see, the structure and meaning of the constitutional text are not significantly altered by exchanging gender-exclusive for gender-inclusive language, or by substituting all modalities of “govern” with sacred texts, practices or worshipping community, or just by variations of “practice.” A new rule of government for institutions beyond the state was clearly thinkable 200 years ago and already structurally embedded as a possibility in this foundational text. For the text may include more issues and embrace a larger representative body without being altered in its core. Therefore, it was the actual tearing down of authoritarian notions of social heads and fathers, and of their material manifestations in the real world, that took courage. The combination of radical thinking and exceptional practical courage is what in the end gave us democracy. And only this combination can change the Church towards a more feminist ethical design.

What would happen in Europe if a democratic political address is extended to include sacred texts and spiritual practices? As we know, ecclesiastical changes are taking place. Texts are retranslated, canons are altered, new liturgies and rituals are emerging, Churches are experimenting with participatory democracy. Yet, this reform work may turn out to be more crucial than what may be fully grasped from the pulpit and the religious classroom. For if a new

¹⁵ *Declaration of Independence*. The terms substituted for are shown in brackets.

form of ultraconservative political populism is about to take hold of a growing number of young males in Europe today, tainted with sentiments and death-drives from the Radical Right, the Church is called to radically choose public over private life and to re-cultivate its knowledge of the sociality of God in the collective lives of humans. To govern horizontally and by the inclusion of new sacred texts and practices may turn out to be the best re-skilling gift people can hope to get from Church in our time, at least when it comes to finding community, opening the hearts, and start caring about the fear and pain of others. This is not a call to construct a new anti-slavery movement of old, but a new anti-totalitarianism movement of the present that will guard against throwing women back to a pre-ordained gendered cosmos, race to the centre stage, and civilisation back to hierarchy and violence.

This article discusses the alternative vision of the U.S. American constitution and its early feminist critique, and argues that both vision and critique are relevant in a contemporary European setting. The U.S. 1776 Declaration of Independence conceptualised authority more horizontally and used the nature argument to promote kinship and equality, not division. Being born equalised being created by God, which meant inheriting the same unalienable, natural rights. This allowed for a radically new anthropology and gave weight to birthright as a new, legal principle. The “natural” powers of fathers had to yield to the “natural” egalitarianism of brotherhood as society’s basic principle. Yet, patriarchy did not disappear. A new distinction between the public and private spheres made it possible for the state to have two norm-sets for society simultaneously: a democratic, negotiated norm-set for polity and a private, authoritarian norm-set for the home and church. The early feminists critiqued the founding fathers for merely distributing equality to their sons, and argued that women’s freedom required that also the basics of spiritual brotherly kinship and similitude were changed. An additional theological problem is whether the Church truly belongs to its assigned private sphere and can continue to be organised as a pre-modern ancestral institution, or whether the Church is a public institution that must be reformed when society reforms. If it is not reformed, how will Church meet the rise of ultraconservative political populism among a growing number of young males in Europe today, and counter their yearning to put women back into place – once again?

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