

**WHOSE FAMILY MATTERS?**

**White Christianity, Black Feminism, and the Family Values Movement**

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## ABSTRACT

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Between the 1960s and the 1980s, national attention on the perceived destruction of the Black family defined the white, middle-class American family as normative. The family values movement between the 1970s and 1990s continued this understanding. However, an analysis of the family values movement with attention to the intersection of race, class, and gender is frequently overlooked. In this thesis, I seek to understand how feminist and womanist theologians engaged with the bible and interpreted gender roles and family, as well as the significance of race to the family values movement.

This thesis integrates race into the discussion on gender roles and family values through the lens of biblical interpretation by predominantly white feminist theology and African-American womanist theology. Womanists' intersectional understanding of oppression through race, class, and gender serves as the foundation for this inquiry. I analyze how feminist and womanist theologians invoked family and women's role within it based on their distinct methods of biblical interpretation.

To pursue this underrepresented research on the significance of race within biblical gender roles and family values, I explore the religious basis of white conservative evangelicals' profamily agenda. I assess the salience of race in constructing the "traditional American family" based on the social and political activism of white conservative evangelicals in the Religious Right. I also show how their criticism of mainstream feminism and feminist theology results in their advocacy for family values. My findings address the importance of intersectionality in determining whose family matters.

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## Introduction

The 1970s were characterized by the rise of the Religious Right and white conservative evangelicals' family values rhetoric. Their understanding of the family unit as the only basis for a stable society motivated their social and political advocacy for the "traditional American family." This traditional family typically constitutes of a two-parent household where the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is the homemaker. The Religious Right's narrow construction of family raises the question of whose family matters.

The family values movement occurred around the same time as the rise in feminist theology which motivated conservative evangelicals' antifeminist critique. Through this thesis, I seek to understand how white feminist and African-American womanist theologians engage with the Bible and interpret gender roles and family. I also utilize womanist theology's intersectional understanding of oppression through race, class, and gender to inquire about the significance of race during the family values movement.

In the background chapter, I explore the reasons for black women's resistance to joining the women's liberation movement. I then assess the national attention on black families after the release of a federal report on the desperate condition of black families. This report defines the white, middle-class family as the normative family structure and this understanding of family continues into the family values movement. I also establish the importance of the Black church to the African-American community.

The second chapter provides an overview of feminist and womanist theology. I begin by outlining the history of feminism and assess the impact of the historical construction of domesticity on gender roles. The first section on feminism highlights the evangelical, liberation, and rejectionist perspectives within white feminist theology. I explain their distinct approaches to

biblical interpretation and assess their primary objectives. The second section on womanism addresses the impact of the Black feminist movement on womanist thought and introduces womanists' intersectional focus on black women's oppression through race, class, and gender.

In the third chapter I assess how feminist and womanist theologians engage with the Bible. I focus on the evangelical feminists' commitment to scriptural authority while simultaneously addressing texts they believe have been misinterpreted to support women's subordination. I also evaluate how womanist theologians critically reinterpret biblical stories by focusing on the perspective of the oppressed. Their method of theological interpretation is illustrated through womanist engagement with the biblical story of Hagar. My findings highlight the distinct relationships feminists and womanists have with the Bible.

In the final chapter, I evaluate the Religious Right's construction of family and resistance to feminist theological interpretation. I focus on white conservative evangelicals' involvement in profamily political and social activism through organizations such as the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family. I also consider the impact of evangelicals' fundamentalist leanings on their perception of evangelical feminism as unbiblical and anti-family. Finally, I assess the significance of race within the family values movement based on the Religious Right's engagement, or lack thereof, with lower-class, families of color

## Chapter 1: Background

In this section I provide background information that will support my study of the salience of race within the Christian faith and American family structure. I look at race and its relation to religion, family, and the start of feminism which later influences feminist and womanist theology. I begin with a particular focus on black women because of their significant role in womanist theology and the construction of black families. I also explain the impact of the Moynihan report on the perception of black families in the 1960s in preparation for my later assessment of the role of race in the family values movement. Finally, I explore the discourse on family and the Christian faith within the Black community between the 1970s and 1990s through scholarship and popular culture.

### ***Black Women & The Women's Liberation Movement***

The second wave of the American feminist movement gained traction after the wide response to the 1963 release of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Freidan. This seminal work served as the catalyst for the women's liberation movement by exposing the disillusionment of primarily white middle- and upper-class women with the social expectations of being a wife and mother.<sup>1</sup> Between 1945 and 1960, the idealization of domesticity was evident in the post-World War II society. The baby boom and the growth of suburbia contributed to the increasing importance of housewives. The media also promoted the image of the perfect nuclear family which supported the renewal of domestic ideals on womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, was also notable for its role in exposing Americans to how the societal emphasis on postwar domesticity was damaging for women. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History. Since 1877*, 450.

created the President's Commission on the Status of Women which was tasked with developing a report on American women.<sup>2</sup> In addition to *The Feminine Mystique*, the 1963 report was responsible for sparking a national debate on women's issues.

Unlike the first wave of the feminist movement, which focused primarily on women's suffrage, second wave feminism addressed institutional sexism and social norms that influenced "the origins of women's oppression, the nature of gender, and the role of the family."<sup>3</sup> Although the women's rights agenda evolved and expanded to include issues that affected working class women and women of color such as equal pay, childcare funding, and the Equal Rights Amendment,<sup>4</sup> many black women were initially hesitant to join. White middle-class women became the overwhelming majority of second wave feminists and dominated the membership of women's liberation organizations. This is a key reason why many black women bought into the popular stereotype of the women's movement as a "middle-class White woman's struggle to escape from housework and child rearing, to get out of her home and into the job market."<sup>5</sup> This misconception of the movement led black women to believe they did not need to be involved. Black women concluded that they had already been "liberated" if contemporary feminists' understanding of freedom was limited to their ability to work outside the home and escape the discontentment of being a housewife.

Black women's lives were also characterized by their experiences of both racism and sexism because of their race and gender. In the early 1960s, the civil rights movement played a significant role in the resurgence of the feminist movement because of the discrimination women

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Britannica, "Feminism - The Second Wave of Feminism."

<sup>4</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History. Since 1877*, 470.

<sup>5</sup> "Hang-Ups of Black Women," 6.



faced while fighting for civil rights.<sup>6</sup> Initially, black women believed their fight to end racial injustice superseded gender issues. This logic resurfaced in their “blacks first and women second” justification for separating themselves from the women’s liberation movement.<sup>7</sup> However, while working with civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), they became aware of the gender-based prejudice that influenced the subservient status of women within the civil rights movement. Therefore, black women became the ideal candidates to lead society in addressing the dual oppression of racism and sexism because of their distinct experiences. Their unique ability to serve as a bridge between the civil rights and women’s rights movements was also referenced to mobilize them to get involved with women’s liberation.<sup>8</sup>

Both movements influenced black women’s understanding of the interplay between race, gender, and class. This created an additional barrier to their involvement in the second wave of feminism because although white feminists viewed gender discrimination as their primary opponent, black women were forced to navigate their struggles with racism and sexism on a daily basis. Their unique experiences heavily influenced the founding of Black feminist organizations that would comprehensively address the breadth of their needs. This multidimensional understanding of oppression to include race, gender, and class was later integrated into the emerging academic and religious discipline of womanism.

### ***Black Families & The Moynihan Report***

The national attention on women in the 1960s was accompanied by growing concerns on the perceived destruction of Black communities by unstable, black female-headed households.

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<sup>6</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History. Since 1877*, 448.

<sup>7</sup> “Hang-Ups of Black Women,” 6.

<sup>8</sup> “Back Black Women in Lib,” 6.

The state of the Black family in the United States was a point of contention throughout the 1970s and 1980s after sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan published a controversial report on the desperate condition of black families. “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” was colloquially known as the Moynihan Report and released in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s war on poverty. This “unconditional war on poverty” motivated LBJ’s social welfare legislation to address the rising rates of poor Americans.<sup>9</sup> In the report, Moynihan’s research led to the simple conclusion that the Black family structure, or lack thereof, was at the core of the issues in the Black community. The report pathologized black families by describing the high rates of female-headed households, welfare dependency, unemployment, crime, and children born illegitimately compared to their white counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

Within the family unit, Moynihan found the disorganization of black families was a result of the failure of Black fathers to fulfill their role established by the American society. This patriarchal role of fathers as the head of the family and breadwinner was replaced by the matriarchal structure of Black communities which “imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout the report, the structure of the middle-class American family served as the normative family structure and standard the Black community failed to realize. However, Moynihan made a clear distinction between the stable and successful Black middle-class and the unstable, deteriorating lower-class Blacks who served as the primary subject of his report.

The perceived matriarchal structure of black families can be defined by the reversal of the traditional roles of husband and wife. These families are characterized by fathers that are absent,

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<sup>9</sup> Britannica, “War on Poverty.”

<sup>10</sup> Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.”

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

unemployed, or earning low wages that require the mother to work. According to Moynihan, “this dependence on the mother's income undermines the position of the father and deprives the children of the kind of attention, particularly in school matters, which is now a standard feature of middle-class upbringing.”<sup>12</sup> Once again, the predominantly white middle-class norm is raised as the model African-Americans should aspire to achieve. Anthropologist Dr. Irene Diggs explained how sociologists like Moynihan were able to continue to perpetuate “insulting myths about female domination and instability in black families, because they insist on defining family according to a set, predetermined value system...”<sup>13</sup>

The Moynihan Report’s idea of a “Black matriarchal society” was another substantial factor influencing black women’s resistance to fully participating in the women’s movement. According to civil rights attorney and member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Frankie M. Freeman, “Black women are acutely sensitive to the charge that they constitute a matriarchal society which has emasculated black men; therefore, they have an obligation to stay behind black men and push them into power.”<sup>14</sup> Since the unfulfilled role of black men was a perceived cause of the issues within the Black community, black women felt obligated to serve as their support system. This is irrespective of the fact that almost a third of all black families were female-headed by 1973.<sup>15</sup>

The African-American community viewed what the nation had labeled as a crisis of the Black family as an effort to “discredit Black fathers, mothers, and children.”<sup>16</sup> As opposed to a pathology endemic to the Black community, Black voices expressed how this war against Black

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>13</sup> “Black Man's Family,” 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Black Femmes are Not Liberated,” 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett Jr., “The 10 Biggest Myths About The Black Family,” 123.

manhood and womanhood hardly addressed the real problem: the Black community's failure to deal with issues within the social and economic structure of American society.<sup>17</sup> The Moynihan Report was instrumental in painting an image of African-Americans as responsible for the problems their community suffered from. This generated the controversy surrounding the report because Moynihan essentially blamed Black Americans for their problems in the midst of their efforts to address racism during the civil rights movement.

The historical importance of extended family units in the Black community represented an additional way black families did not reflect the "ideal" American family system. This traditional nuclear family was replaced by extended families composed of mothers, children, grandparents, and other relatives or non-relatives. This diverse family composition was also a continuation of their African and Caribbean cultural roots.<sup>18</sup> Although this value of collective living is the result of both voluntarily and involuntarily circumstances, it has contributed to the resiliency of African-American families. The common cultural patterns that have influenced their resiliency include: "supportive social networks; flexible relationships within the family unit; a strong sense of religiosity; extensive use of extended family helping arrangements; the adoption of fictive kin who become as family, and strong identification with their racial group."<sup>19</sup> These extended family networks were also a significant source of social support for single Black mothers who needed to supplement the resources they lacked as single parents.<sup>20</sup> In addition to extended families, the Black church was another institutional support network in the African-American community.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>18</sup> McAdoo, "African-American Families: Strengths and Realities," 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>20</sup> McAdoo, "Changes in the Formation and Structure of Black Families: The Impact on Black Women," 19-20.

## *The Black Church*

The Black church has played a significant role in the lives of Black Americans for centuries. In 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church became the nation's oldest Black religious denomination.<sup>21</sup> Independent Black churches formed primarily in response to the racism Black church-goers encountered in mixed-race churches as opposed to the presence of theological divides between races.<sup>22</sup> African-Americans experienced segregation and exclusion that hindered them from experiencing full membership in predominantly white churches.

In addition to providing a spiritual foundation for its members, the Black church has remained a "social, political, and economic force in Black communities."<sup>23</sup> The social involvement of the church can be seen in early biblical interpretation supporting antislavery activism. Black Americans have been able to identify with the people of Israel in the Bible and their exodus from Egypt, which was the location of their 430-year enslavement.<sup>24</sup> Humanities scholar, Sylvester Johnson, underscores the application of this biblical story to the Black Christian community by explaining:

...they adopted the biblical motif of the Exodus, the narrative of ancient Hebrews escaping Egyptian slavery through divine assistance. Black religious activists applied this to the situation of slavery in the United States to assert that slavery was sinful and incompatible with the normative moral universe of Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lyons, "Bicentennial Of The A.M.E. Tradition," 108.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, "African Americans and Religion."

<sup>23</sup> "Ten Religious Groups with Biggest Black Memberships," 140.

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 12:40-41

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, "African Americans and Religion."

Thus, biblical text was interpreted by Black Christians to advocate against the continuation of the institution of slavery. Their ability to apply scripture directly to their struggle with enslavement conveys their reliance on faith for resiliency.

In a 1982 issue of *Jet* magazine, Bishop H. H. Brookins of the A.M.E. Church shed more light on the relationship between the Black community and Christianity:

We Black people have a special suitability for Christianity because Christianity is a religion that is centered in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and we Black people know what suffering is all about. The Bible is a tool for survival for us, not just a pious book.

Christianity is for us the means whereby we rise out of rejection.<sup>26</sup>

This emphasis on the suffering experienced by Jesus Christ as a means through which Black individuals are able to resonate with the Christian faith is a key aspect of Black Liberation theology, which began to develop in the 1960s during the civil rights movement. However, prior to the civil rights movement, Black religious leaders spoke openly about their responsibility to address and alleviate the social and economic issues affecting the Black community. In fact, the A.M.E. Church is known for their long history of civil and social rights activism, and dedication to community involvement.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the civil rights movement, within the Black church there was a significant focus on the “social gospel,” which stresses the social implications of Christianity to advocate for the oppressed. Black Liberation theology is centered on this social gospel and later influenced the emergence of womanist theology. The SCLC, which was first led by Martin Luther King Jr., served as a coalition of churches and other groups involved in civil rights

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<sup>26</sup> “Words of the Week,” 32.

<sup>27</sup> Lyons, “Bicentennial Of The A.M.E. Tradition,” 108.

activism.<sup>28</sup> Their support for the social gospel between the 1950s and 1960s was accompanied and countered by a rise in the fundamentalist view of Christianity.

Fundamentalism was historically grounded in separatism from the broader culture and opposed the social justice activism many Black churches were involved in during the civil rights movement. During this time, popular evangelical preachers with fundamentalist views, such as Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, “preached a strict interpretation of saving spiritual souls, and they impugned civil rights leaders who identified the essence of Christianity with promoting social justice.”<sup>29</sup> The rising popularity of evangelical fundamentalism and its focus on preaching salvation while marginalizing the social gospel became a point of division for Black churches that embraced social activism for racial equality. A key example of this is the 1961 split of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., which was the largest Black organization in the world.<sup>30</sup> In response to the denomination’s rejection of political activism, the Progressive National Baptist Convention was created by those committed to remaining involved in the civil rights movement and other social issues.<sup>31</sup>

The Black church’s importance to the African-American community stems from the values of black families. The local church frequently served as the center of Black community life.<sup>32</sup> A 1986 article in *Ebony* magazine urging black families to return to their spiritual roots expressed, “The family has always been the strongest institution in the Black community, and God has always been at the very center of it.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike the focus of the Moynihan Report on the structure of black families as the ultimate source of their weakness, this article addressed how the

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<sup>28</sup> Jaynes, National Research Council, and Williams, *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society*, 175.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, “African Americans and Religion.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Jaynes, National Research Council, and Williams, *A Common Destiny*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>33</sup> “Return To Spiritual Traditions Of Black Churches And Schools,” 160.

strength of black families was determined by their connection to the church and biblical teaching. Regardless, both perspectives agree that the Black family was the cornerstone of the African-American community. Dr. T.J. Jemison, who served as the president of the National Baptist Convention in the 1980s, stated that within the Black community, "...the schools, churches and other institutions can never be any stronger than the Black family."<sup>34</sup> This reflects the idea of family as the core of all structures within African-American communities.

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<sup>34</sup> "Clergy Share Their Hopes For The 1990s," 27.



## Chapter 2: Overview of Feminist & Womanist Theology

### Feminism

In this section I outline the history of feminist thought, explore the emergence of feminist theology, and evaluate the three primary feminist theological perspectives: evangelical, liberation, and rejectionist. I then show how these three perspectives privilege the experiences of white women, which informs the subsequent section on womanist theologians' intersectional approach to feminist biblical interpretation. My analysis of the main strands of feminist theology also serves as a helpful background for my later application of the evangelical feminist theological perspective to the family values movement.

### *History of Feminist Theology*

Emerging during the second wave of the American feminist movement, Christian feminist theology responded to the particular issue of women's status in the church. While feminist theology started in the late 1960s, women have played an active role in the church for centuries. The New Testament of the Bible documents how Priscilla was involved in building the early church in Rome by leading a house church with and her husband Aquila. In North America, Anne Hutchinson, a Puritan woman, resisted the restrictions that Puritan leaders placed on women's lives by teaching that all individuals, regardless of gender, could communicate with the spirit of God and interpret biblical teachings.<sup>35</sup> These countercultural messages led to her excommunication from the Puritan church and banishment from the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1638.

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<sup>35</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History, Volume 1: To 1877*, 31.

Around the time of the U.S. founding, ideas about “republican motherhood” defined the roles of white middle- and upper-class women in marriage, education, and religion.<sup>36</sup> This concept had religious implications as preachers emphasized women’s innate morality in sermons. In the nineteenth century, notions of republican motherhood developed further into what historians have called the “true womanhood” ideal. Women were regarded as highly moral and, therefore, played a crucial role in family life. True womanhood defined the social value of domesticity, which was exemplified by women that were submissive, virtuous, and pious.<sup>37</sup>

Women’s use of religion as a tool to exercise their moral authority in the public sphere was based on the societal belief that they possessed a natural piety.<sup>38</sup> Women’s role as the moral guardians of society also influenced the growth of moral reform societies in the 1840s. Organizations like the American Female Moral Reform Society allowed women to join movements addressing social issues, such as slavery abolition and alcohol prohibition. Moreover, reform movements permitted women to promote “evangelical Protestant values as a basis for political action.”<sup>39</sup> In 1873, Frances Willard founded the Women’s Christian Temperance Union which allowed women to utilize their religious beliefs as a platform for reform.<sup>40</sup> Women’s religious faith permitted their involvement in social and political issues without overstepping the bounds of domesticity established by republican motherhood and true womanhood.<sup>41</sup> In addition, women’s work for social reform defined the first wave of the feminist movement through the fight for women’s suffrage.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>37</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History, Volume 1: To 1877*, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Braude, “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>40</sup> Lippy and Williams, “Religious Thought: Feminist,” 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 4.

Second wave feminists' critique of institutional sexism and restrictive social norms partially influenced the formal development of feminist theology in the late 1960s. The increasing number of Protestant denominations allowing women's ordination also impacted the growth of feminist theology.<sup>42</sup> Although women have composed a sizable portion of the Christian church laity throughout history, their numerical dominance and "natural piety" never translated into widespread inclusion in religious leadership.<sup>43</sup> Women's newfound ability to serve in leadership positions in a number of Christian denominations after the 1950s encouraged the rise in the number of women enrolled in theological schools.<sup>44</sup> Once they earned doctoral degrees and joined the faculty of theological schools, women had to confront the historical traditions within Christianity that previously justified their exclusion from religious leadership. This led to the academic foundation of feminist theology within Christian theological education.

Liberation feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether defines feminism as "a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant (rationality, power) and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary (intuition, passivity)." The primary concerns of feminist theology are based on this understanding of feminism as a critical evaluation of patriarchal structures. Feminist theologians evaluating the status of women within the church highlight numerous issues including sexism, women's ordination, biblical interpretation, and the androcentric language in the Bible. All strands of feminist theology focus on gender by analyzing women's experience.<sup>45</sup> Although the amount of authority their experience holds varies between perspectives, understanding women's experience is essential to constructing a theology

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<sup>42</sup> Ruether, "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Ruether, "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," 7.

<sup>45</sup> Nesson, "Liberation Theologies in America."

that actively promotes full equality between men and women. The following sub-sections will explore the three main perspectives within predominantly white feminist theology: evangelical, liberation, and rejectionist.

### ***Evangelical Feminist Perspective***

Evangelical feminist theology was conceived in response to the belief that the other feminist perspectives cannot be developed within the traditional Christian religion. Evangelical feminists claim that the “foundational theologies and doctrines are respected while the social constructions and organizations of evangelical culture are subject to critical inquiry.”<sup>46</sup> These feminist theologians believe the restrictions placed on women in Christianity are not inherent to biblical Christianity, but rather, result from misreadings of scripture.<sup>47</sup> According to womanist theologian Jaqueline Grant, evangelical (or biblical) feminist theology is based on dialogue with the Bible and remains centered on Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> Unlike some liberation and rejectionist feminist perspectives, the Bible still serves as an authoritative source for evangelical feminists and they see scripture as their primary theological resource.<sup>49</sup>

A foundational aspect of evangelical feminism is the understanding of the relationship between men and women in light of God creating humans in the *imago dei*, or image of God. They cite Genesis 1:27, which states, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”<sup>50</sup> Evangelical feminists employ this idea that all humans were created in the image of God to refute the subordination of women. They believe the second-class citizenship of women in the church manifests through hierarchal

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<sup>46</sup> Lippy and Williams, “Religious Thought: Feminist,” 9.

<sup>47</sup> Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> The Holy Bible, New International Version

relationships between males and females and women's exclusion from ordination. The importance of recognizing both men and women as a reflection of God through the concept of *imago dei* is rooted in the reality that "an affinity between maleness and divineness remains the basic assumption behind every argument from the nature of God for the exclusion of women from the office of the ministry."<sup>51</sup> The use of male pronouns for God undoubtedly impacts this association of maleness with the divine. However, the common masculinization of God disregards the masculine *and* feminine characterization of God in the Bible, which is first seen in the *imago dei* concept.<sup>52</sup> If both males and females are made in the image of God, God encompasses both masculine and feminine traits.

Grant also explores evangelical feminists' Christology, or theological understanding of Jesus Christ. She asserts that the life and actions of Jesus Christ are able to serve as the basis for the egalitarian arguments of evangelical feminists. Grant labels Jesus a "non-conformist" because of his uncommon interactions with women amidst the cultural conditions of first century Israel and rabbinic Judaism.<sup>53</sup> The stories in the New Testament depict his rejection of the social norms and cultural customs during his time, particularly those in relation to women. Jesus also emerges as a feminist for evangelical theologians directly through his actions and indirectly through his teachings. Through studying his life, evangelical feminist theologians conclude that his actions supported "a rejection of patriarchy and an affirmation of women's experience."<sup>54</sup> Therefore, evangelical feminists' engagement with the Bible and study of the life of Jesus Christ supports their advocacy for equality between men and women in the church. The substantial role of the Bible and Jesus within this perspective bolsters its spiritual authority among evangelicals

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<sup>51</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 95.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

who see Jesus as the cornerstone of Christian faith. This significant role of Christology in evangelical feminism will be further explored in the following section on feminist and womanist engagement with the Bible.

To be sure, not all evangelical feminists are united in their understanding of what equality looks like within the context of Christianity. The two strains of thought dominating evangelical feminism are called complementarianism and egalitarianism,. On the one hand, the complementarian view stresses that men and women are innately equal but different through their divinely ordained roles. On the other hand, the egalitarian view resists divinely ordained gender roles and calls for full equality between men and women in family, society, and church leadership.<sup>55</sup> This thesis will focus on the egalitarian strain of evangelical feminism. I will also assess the Bible's role in feminist theologians' egalitarian interpretations, as opposed to its use as a key instrument to justify women's subservience. In addition, in a later section I will evaluate the egalitarian response to the popularity of the complementarian view within the family values movement.

Although evangelical feminism serves as an alternative to the more radical views espoused within the liberation and rejectionist perspectives, conservative evangelical Christians typically reject all feminist thought because of its association with the secular feminist movement. They argue that evangelical feminists' notion of equality does not come from the Bible, but from the "contemporary cultural environment."<sup>56</sup> Some go as far to say feminism is connected to humanist beliefs,<sup>57</sup> which evangelicals oppose because of its rejection of theism. The substantial role of women's experience in constructing feminist theology influences

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<sup>55</sup> Lippy and Williams, "Religious Thought: Feminist," 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

evangelicals link between feminist theology and secular humanism. Despite the pushback evangelical feminists have received from the greater evangelical Christian community, their affirmation of the authority of scripture provides common ground to assess the doctrine of the Religious Right and the family values movement.

Some advocates of women-centered theologies critique evangelical feminists and their focus on biblical interpretation and authority. According to liberation feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, evangelical feminists spend too much time establishing the authority of biblical texts and too little time “analyzing the particular roots and historical structures of women’s oppression and struggles for liberation in patriarchal biblical history and religion.”<sup>58</sup> In addition to the importance of understanding the patriarchal origins of biblical traditions, womanist theologian Jaqueline Grant criticizes evangelical feminists’ analysis for being too narrow and simplistic to address the multi-dimensional needs of black women. Instead of addressing oppression, there is “a single line of argument geared to the elimination of sexism from theology and Christology.”<sup>59</sup> Fiorenza and Grant’s critique of evangelical feminism reflects the way some feminist theological perspectives primarily focus on women’s experiences, which is a topic I will consider below.

### ***Liberation Feminist Perspective***

Both the liberation and rejectionist feminist theological perspectives are distinct from evangelical feminism because they incorporate new approaches to biblical interpretation. The liberation perspective particularly focuses on challenging the patriarchal character of scripture and its use to oppress women within the Christian faith. These feminist theologians’ method of biblical interpretation is rooted in recognizing and condemning patriarchy within biblical text

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<sup>58</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 86.

<sup>59</sup> Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 109.

and Christian tradition in order to advocate for the liberation of women. According to Grant, these writers exemplify the strain of white feminist liberation theology concerned with feminist critique of the Bible, as opposed to the other strain which focuses on scriptural primacy.<sup>60</sup> Although these liberation feminist theologians utilize the Bible as one of several sources in their work, they prioritize addressing the patriarchal roots of biblical tradition through feminist critique. They also argue that some scripture is inherently patriarchal which influences their focus on women's experience as a primary source for the liberation perspective.<sup>61</sup>

This thesis will primarily focus on their liberation-centered critique of the Bible. Fiorenza defines this strand of the liberation theological perspective as:

a feminist theological hermeneutic of the Bible that has as its canon the liberation of women from oppressive sexist texts, structures, institutions, and internalized male values maintains that solely those traditions and texts of the Bible that transcend their patriarchal culture and time have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible should not continue to be a tool for the patriarchal oppression of women.<sup>62</sup>

Fiorenza's critical assessment of the Bible is based on her understanding of its role in the "religious legitimization of patriarchy."<sup>63</sup> She further explores the oppressive and liberating aspects of scripture in her feminist classic, *Bread Not Stone*. According to Fiorenza, certain texts in the Bible that have been historically used to support women's secondary status are not patriarchally misinterpreted, they are simply patriarchal texts that serve to legitimate women's subordinate role and second-class citizenship in society and the church.<sup>64</sup> She seeks to assess *if*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>63</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, xvi.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., xii.



and *how* scripture can be redeemed to serve as an empowering resource for women and their struggle to be liberated from all forms of oppression.

Women's experience in their struggle for liberation serves as the foundation of feminist critical interpretation in liberation feminist theology. Since "the Bible no longer functions as authoritative source but as a resource for women's struggle for liberation," traditional gender norms present in the Bible pale against the suffering within women's historic experiences in Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, biblical text is evaluated under the authority of the feminist experience. Feminist theologians' also assess biblical text through a lens of suspicion by looking for androcentric language and patriarchal structures within scripture.<sup>66</sup> Instead of accepting or rejecting the Bible in its entirety, they primarily focus on the passages that can serve as a resource in women's struggle for liberation.<sup>67</sup>

Liberation feminist theologians' attention to women's oppression links their work to African-American womanist theologians. Both see racism as a barrier to women's full liberation from oppression within society and the church. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether addresses the significance of race and class in the discussion on women's liberation through her understanding that a "monolithic analysis of sexism as the ultimate oppression obscures the way in which sexism is structurally integrated with class and race."<sup>68</sup> The use of women's experience as a point of departure for this theological perspective mirrors the importance of black women's lived experiences to womanist theology. Both seek to address the exclusion and invisibility of women within biblical interpretation.<sup>69</sup> For instance, Fiorenza understands how the Bible has

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>68</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 134.

<sup>69</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 14.

become the oppressor *and* defender of women depending on its interpretation. She explains that “the Bible has provided theological support for Christian women and men who rejected slavery, poverty, and patriarchal sexism as against God’s will.”<sup>70</sup> I will expound upon Fiorenza’s allusion to the triple oppression of race, class, and gender on black women in the following section on womanist theology.

### ***Rejectionist Feminist Perspective***

The rejectionist feminist perspective focuses on the patriarchal nature of the church and its role in the ongoing subordination of women. This perspective can be seen as early as 1895 in *The Women’s Bible*. This controversial book by women’s suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton popularized feminist religious criticism by addressing “passages of the Christian Bible that were most harmful to women’s social positions and [realigning] these texts to serve feminist interests.”<sup>71</sup> Stanton and other feminists rejected some, if not all, of the Bible for the sexism they understood to be inherent to the text.<sup>72</sup>

In the rejectionist perspective, the Bible is viewed as irredeemable because of its inability to overcome the patriarchal character of Christian scripture. In response, rejectionist feminists consider women’s experience to be the sole authority for their theological interpretation. Although prominent rejectionist feminist theologian Mary Daly began her career a reformer within the Roman Catholic Church, she eventually rejected the possibility that women and men could be equal within the church. Daly’s decision to abandon the Christian faith stemmed from her belief that patriarchalism was endemic to Christianity.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, in order to eliminate women’s oppression, she rejected its textual source. Fiorenza explains that this “androcentric-

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>71</sup> Lippy and Williams, “Religious Thought: Feminist,” 6.

<sup>72</sup> Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 155.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 159.

paternalistic character” of the Bible is what drives rejectionist feminists to challenge the authority of the Bible.<sup>74</sup>

I will not focus on the rejectionist perspective in further sections of this thesis because I am interested in those who continue to appeal to the Bible in some way. Therefore, I will consider evangelical feminist and womanist theologians, and their discussion of race, gender, and family during the family values movement, as the Bible functions a theological source for their thinking.

## **Womanism**

This section covers the history of Black feminism and womanism. It also explains the creation of womanist theology as an academic discipline in response to the exclusion of black women’s experiences from Black liberation theology *and* white feminist theology. Later on, I will utilize this study on the salience of race to Black liberation and womanist theologies to evaluate the role of race within the family values movement.

## ***Black Feminism***

Black women’s experiences of gender discrimination within the civil rights movement and racial discrimination within the women’s liberation movement inspired the Black feminist movement. The recognition of the different needs and struggles of black women sparked the formal establishment of Black feminist organizations with the 1973 founding of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA).<sup>75</sup> However, Black feminist thought appeared much earlier in American history, as seen in the life of abolitionist Sojourner Truth. She addressed the unique obstacles black female abolitionists

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<sup>74</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History, Volume 2: Since 1877*, 482.

faced because of the combined challenges of gender restrictions and racial prejudice.<sup>76</sup> Truth's work as a black women's rights activist is exemplified through her famous 1851 speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" In a reference to her time as a slave, Truth stated:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?...I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?<sup>77</sup>

Truth's speech illustrates the dual oppression of race and gender experienced by black women that the subsequent Black feminist movement directly addressed.

The Combahee River Collective was another notable organization founded at the beginning of the movement. Black lesbian feminists founded the Collective in 1974 after separating from the Boston chapter of the NBFO to better address their experience of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation as "interlocking systems of oppression."<sup>78</sup> The goal of Black feminism to address black women's desire to be liberated from the concurrent oppression of race, gender, and class also reflects the idea of intersectionality, which would later be coined by Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>77</sup> U.S. National Park Service, "Sojourner Truth: Ain't I A Woman?"

<sup>78</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History, Volume 2: Since 1877*, 483.

<sup>79</sup> Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

## *History of Womanist Theology*

After Black feminism was established, African-American womanist theology emerged under the larger umbrella of womanism. The term “womanism” was coined by author and Black feminist Alice Walker. In her 1983 collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker defined a womanist as “a black feminist or feminist of color.”<sup>80</sup> While womanism caters to all women of color, womanist theory centers on the needs and experiences of black women. Walker also explains that womanists are women committed to the “survival and wholeness” of all people, which includes women *and* men.<sup>81</sup> The situation of womanism within the greater context of transformative change for all is also reflected in womanist theology.

Black feminist biblical scholars established womanist theology in response to the limited focus of Black liberation theology on the struggles of black men and white feminist theology on the struggles of white women.<sup>82</sup> Theologian James Cone founded Black liberation theology as a response to white racism in the United States amidst the civil rights and Black Power movements in the 1960s.<sup>83</sup> Although this theological perspective was established to confront the suffering and oppression of Black people by amplifying the liberative and social justice-focused messages in the Bible, its rhetoric was mainly centered on the experiences of black men. While constructing their perspective, womanist theologians adopted Black liberation theology’s use of the authentic Black experience as a primary source. However, womanists primarily addressed the overlooked struggles of black women.<sup>84</sup> Their ongoing exclusion from the development of liberation theologies perpetuated the idea that “all the blacks were men and all the women were

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<sup>80</sup> Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 204.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Nesson, “Liberation Theologies in America.”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

white.”<sup>85</sup> This led black female theologians and religious scholars to establish the suffering and oppression experienced by black women as the foundation of womanist theology.<sup>86</sup>

Womanist thought centers on the experiences of black women and positions them as the lens through which other marginalized communities can be understood.<sup>87</sup> The intersectional approach of womanism stems from the triadic structure of oppression faced by black women through race, class, and gender. Womanists use this multidimensional structure because they understand that full human liberation cannot be achieved through eliminating just one form of oppression.<sup>88</sup> Their commitment to analyzing multiple systems of oppression directly addresses white feminist theology’s limited focus on gender and patriarchy as the primary issues excluding women from full equality.

Womanist theologians, such as Delores Williams and Jacqueline Grant, significantly influenced the construction of womanist religious thought.<sup>89</sup> Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* is a foundational work in the academic field of womanist theology. She describes womanist religious thought as an attempt to “help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community.”<sup>90</sup> This depicts the function of womanist theology to evaluate and employ Christianity through the lens of African-American women’s experiences.

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<sup>85</sup> Lippy and Williams, “Religious Thought: Womanist,” 4.

<sup>86</sup> Nesson, “Liberation Theologies in America.”

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 202.

<sup>89</sup> Lippy and Williams, “Religious Thought: Womanist,” 4.

<sup>90</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, xiv.

Womanist theology also shares the mission of white liberation feminist theology to challenge oppressive biblical text and tradition through critical engagement with scripture.<sup>91</sup> However, womanist theologians have a larger scope than feminist theologians because of their interest in creating social transformation by utilizing black women's experiences of discrimination and oppression to address the struggles of other marginalized populations.<sup>92</sup> The womanist critique of white feminist theology attempts to tackle the false idea that white middle- and upper-class women's experiences represent the experiences of all women, especially lower-class, women of color. Concerning black women's rejection of white feminism, Grant explains, "class differences mean that while Black women are dealing with 'survival' issues, White women are dealing with 'fulfillment' issues." I will explore the importance of survival to black women's experience in depth in the following section on womanist engagement with the Bible.

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<sup>91</sup> Lippy and Williams, "Religious Thought: Womanist," 5.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

### **Chapter 3: Biblical Interpretation & Application**

In this chapter I assess how feminist and womanist theologians engage with the Bible. This includes their understanding of gender roles and family based on key scriptures cited for and against feminist principles. I also explore competing arguments that Christianity either oppresses or defends women. My findings highlight the distinct relationships feminists and womanists have with the Bible. I also examine how both theological perspectives invoke family and women's role within it. In the following chapter, I will utilize this study to evaluate the Religious Right's construction of family and response to feminist theological interpretation.

The next section primarily focuses on biblical engagement within the egalitarian strain of evangelical feminist theology. However, I occasionally reference other feminist theologians who shared some of the interpretation techniques utilized by evangelical feminists. Henceforth, "evangelical feminist theologians" and "feminist theologians" will be used interchangeably.

#### **Feminist Engagement with the Bible**

Feminist theologians' biblical interpretation and application stems from their effort to see women's full equality realized in the church and society as a whole. Their engagement with the Bible began through recovering stories about women in scripture to highlight their unique roles and experiences.<sup>93</sup> This includes women in the Old Testament, such as Deborah, who served in a prominent role as a judge and prophet for the people of Israel. Scholars of feminist theology also criticized passages "authorizing blatant discrimination against women in the Bible" and highlighted the patriarchal context of biblical text.<sup>94</sup> Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible

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<sup>93</sup> Nesson, "Liberation Theologies in America."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.



focused on stories including violence against women in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. She also addressed the neglected story of Hagar, whose struggle as an Egyptian slave plays a significant role in womanist engagement with the Bible.

### ***The Creation Story***

Evangelical feminists utilize the foundational concept of *imago dei*, which originates in the creation story, to advocate for full equality between men and women. They offer this reading to counter how the story has been historically used to undermine the status of women based on Eve's role in "the Fall." As scholar Craig Nessen explains:

...in the second biblical creation story (Genesis 3), the blame for original sin has been directed primarily at the woman (Eve), mitigating the role of the man (Adam). This misogynist interpretation of the fall into sin has had devastating consequences for women throughout church history, authorizing the scapegoating of women. The naming of pain in childbirth and subjugation to one's husband as punishments inflicted upon women as consequences of the Fall solidify a social order in which men are expected to dominate women.<sup>95</sup>

Nessen conveys how Christians see a system of hierarchal patriarchy at the beginning of the Bible.

Feminist theologians contest this interpretation. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty are prominent evangelical feminist scholars concerned with the blame placed on women for the original sin. In Genesis 3:16 God punishes Eve by saying, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Scanzoni and Hardesty refute the use of this verse

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

and others to justify women's inferiority. Instead, they view Eve's punishment as a prediction or prophecy of men's future relations with women, particularly in the context of marriage.<sup>96</sup>

"Nowhere in in the Bible is Genesis 3:16 quoted or referred to as establishing a general subordination of woman to man." Therefore, this statement "is not an imperative order of creation but rather the element of disorder that disturbs the original peace of creation."

Evangelical feminist engagement with the creation story demonstrates their commitment to upholding scriptural authority while also challenging misogynistic biblical interpretation.

### *Household Codes*

Evangelical feminists also address the New Testament household codes that have been referenced to defend women's subordination. These key scriptures outline hierarchal relations within the family, and include rationale for women's submission and silence.<sup>97</sup> In *Bread Not Stone*, Fiorenza explains that "biblical texts have to be read in their communal, social, and religious contexts and understood as responses of faith to particular historical situations."<sup>98</sup>

Understanding the first century context of these letters allows these feminist theologians to distinguish their cultural salience in the past from their contemporary relevance. According to Fiorenza, the common conflation of culturally-bound texts with timeless principles has "led to the silencing or marginalization of women in the church and legitimized [their] societal and ecclesiastical exploitation by patriarchal family and church structures."<sup>99</sup>

While feminist theologians and their critics reference a number of scriptures, I will focus on verses that speak to women's role in marriage and place in family and church. The institution of marriage first emerges as a union ordained by God after the creation of Adam and Eve.

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<sup>96</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 69.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

Genesis 2:24 states, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” God’s original creation of marriage is linked to the importance of New Testament scripture that defines the role of men and women in marriage. Today, the Christian church continues to use these passages to inform family dynamics.

In the book of Ephesians, a section of Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in the Greek city of Ephesus is widely cited for authorizing women’s subservience. Paul states:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... (Ephesians 5:21-25)

In *All We're Meant to Be*, Scanzoni and Hardesty begin their treatment of this passage by explaining that the idea of male dominance and female submission in marriage is not unique to Christianity.<sup>100</sup> To show that this marital hierarchy is not limited to the Christian faith, they provide examples of this view in the Hindu and Confucian beliefs. They also cite first-century Roman culture where the *paterfamilias*, or “father of a family,” had authority over his entire household. Scanzoni and Hardesty’s primary interpretation of Ephesians 5 is based on the idea of mutual sacrifice, rather than women’s one-sided burden of submission. Their view is rooted in Ephesians 5:21, which requires *both* spouses to participate in the act of submission. Scanzoni and Hardesty define “the reciprocity of mutual respect, self-sacrificing concern, and deep affection” as the key messages of this passage.<sup>101</sup> Their interpretation counters those who limit its requirements to women’s submission.

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<sup>100</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 98.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

### *Scriptural Interpretation*

Scanzoni and Hardesty claim that they read scripture to find the “spirit of the law,” rather than being confined to the “letter of the law.”<sup>102</sup> This aligns with other feminist theologians’ focus on evaluating biblical text within its social, cultural, and historical context. When analyzing various passages historically used to justify women’s subordination, Scanzoni and Hardesty ask if the text is directed at a particular situation in time, rather than establishing a general principle for all Christians to follow.<sup>103</sup> Evangelical feminists also emphasize texts that affirm women’s equality. They point to Galatians 3:28 which states, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse serves as a key example of how Christianity speaks against women’s second-class citizenship.<sup>104</sup>

Evangelical feminists also utilize scripture to redefine popular interpretations of women in the Bible. In response to sentiments that Abraham’s wife Sarah was a model of quiet submissiveness, Scanzoni and Hardesty state that “Sarah was by no means a dull, colorless, subservient person, but rather displayed real spirit and voiced her own opinions.”<sup>105</sup> They explain:

...it was Sarah’s idea that Abraham should have a child by her maidservant Hagar rather than waiting for God’s time and plan. But later, when Sarah demanded the expulsion of Ishmael (son of Abraham’s union with the maidservant), and Abraham disagreed, it was

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<sup>102</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 102.

<sup>103</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 71.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

*God* who told Abraham to obey his wife! “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (Gen. 21:12).<sup>106</sup>

In this example, Scanzoni and Hardesty highlight Sarah’s agency within her marriage and her God-given authority. Their engagement with this story is drastically different from womanist theologians’ Hagar-centered evaluation, which I will evaluate in the following section.

### ***Feminist Christology***

As outlined in my assessment of the evangelical feminist theological perspective in the previous chapter, the study of Jesus Christ plays a significant role in feminist engagement with the Bible. Feminist theologians’ particular focus on the biblical stories explaining Jesus’ interactions with women informs their understanding of women’s role in the Christian faith. According to Grant, evangelical feminists’ “view of Jesus Christ as the example and model for the Christian way of relating provides the basis of all their arguments.”<sup>107</sup> Key stories depicting the non-conformist actions of Jesus include his ability to overcome the cultural and gender barriers that would have prohibited his interactions with the Samaritan woman (John 4), the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5), and the woman accused of committing adultery (John 8).<sup>108</sup> These passages show Jesus openly violating the sexist and patriarchal customs prescribing the treatment of women in first-century Israel. According to Christian theologian Paul Jewett, “[Jesus] treated women as fully human, equal to men in every respect; no word of deprecation about women, as such, is ever found on his lips.”<sup>109</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty echo these sentiments in their understanding of the life of Jesus as a model for women’s place in society.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 102.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 59.

Evangelical feminists' engagement with Christology also addresses the impact of the maleness of Jesus on their biblical interpretation. Although the liberation feminists and womanists address the negative implications of a male Christ and its influence on the association of maleness with the divine, evangelical feminists have their own distinct methods of interpretation. Scanzoni and Hardesty also consider how the historical setting of patriarchal Judaism necessitated Jesus' incarnation as a male.<sup>111</sup> In addition to the symbolic reasons for his maleness, they explain:

Christ was male for practical reasons. Jewish women were kept in subjection and sometimes even seclusion. A female Messiah would have had little scriptural knowledge (according to the Talmud, the Torah should rather be burned than transmitted to a women), and would not have been allowed to teach publicly in the synagogue, or have been believed if she had.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, their reasoning for the maleness of Jesus is contextually based. This mirrors how evangelical feminists' method of biblical interpretation pays special attention to the historical, social, and religious contexts in which scripture was written.

The evangelical feminist perspective also emphasizes the androgyny of Jesus. Based on the Christian belief that God became human in the form of a man through Jesus Christ and "to be human is to be male and female, Jesus must have, in some sense, become both male and female" through possessing both masculine *and* feminine psychological traits.<sup>113</sup> By examining the character of Jesus, biblical scholars have assessed the degree to which he exhibits these masculine and feminine traits.<sup>114</sup> This egalitarian model of Jesus is also supported by the Greek

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>113</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 105.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

language that many books in the New Testament were originally written in. Scanzoni and Hardesty assess how the translation of the Bible into the English language is partially responsible for the misinterpretation of biblical text today.<sup>115</sup> They draw an important distinction between the Greek words *anēr* (male) and *anthropos* (human) because scriptures in the New Testament that discuss the incarnation of God as man consistently contain the word *anthropos*. This emphasizes that “Jesus came to earth not primarily as a male but as a person,”<sup>116</sup> which supports the evangelical feminist argument for egalitarianism.

Evangelical feminist theologians advocate for full equality between men and women through their engagement with the Bible. They establish verses such as Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28 as timeless principles supporting egalitarianism. Evangelical feminists also focus on the historical context scripture was written in to challenge the household codes and other patriarchally misinterpreted biblical texts. They primarily address gender roles, rather than the biblical construction of family, to support their claim for equality. Finally, these feminists reference the life of Jesus Christ to defend their argument that he modeled egalitarianism through his androgynous personality and unorthodox interactions with women in the Bible.

### **Womanist Engagement with the Bible**

In contrast to evangelical feminist theologians’ focus on analyzing specific passages in the Bible that have historically justified patriarchal structures, womanist theologians critically reinterpret biblical stories by focusing on the perspective of the oppressed. Womanist engagement with scripture is centered around discovering black women’s theological voice by assessing their relationship with God in the Bible and the role black women’s experiences

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<sup>115</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 56.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

throughout history. Womanist theologian Delores Williams provides an entry point to study womanist engagement with the Bible in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. This section primarily focuses on Williams' construction of womanist thought in *Sisters in the Wilderness* because her book was instrumental in establishing field of womanist theology.

### ***Introduction to Sisters in the Wilderness***

Williams' analysis of the biblical story of Hagar in *Sisters in the Wilderness* reveals the primary themes of womanist theology which include survival and quality of life, identification with the oppressed, and inclusivity. Black women's tri-dimensional struggle with race, gender, and class is epitomized by Hagar's story, which plays a significant role in understanding the construction of the womanist method of theological interpretation, or hermeneutic.

Williams begins by framing her engagement with Christianity and the Bible within the context of the African-American community. This not only includes the Black church, but also the greater Black community and its art, literature, and culture. Her study is focused on "African-American biblical appropriation," or the Black communities' appropriation of biblical text to understand how God relates to their experiences.<sup>117</sup> The two main traditions of African-American biblical appropriation that Williams addresses are its focus on the liberation of the oppressed and emphasis on female activity. This second tradition which emphasizes female activity and de-emphasizes male activity provides a direct connection to Hagar's story. Williams concludes this female-centered tradition can be named the "*survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation*" to highlight how the Black community emphasizes the presence of God in the midst of and in response to their painful situations.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



The struggle for survival and quality of life are two primary themes found in the biblical story of Hagar. She was the Egyptian slave of Abraham's wife Sarah and also bore his first son Ishmael. Her story is detailed through two accounts in Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21. Williams' interpretation of the text is rooted in Hagar's perspective as a poor and oppressed woman, as opposed to the perspective of her slave owners, Abraham and Sarah. This perspective shift is in line with the womanist mission to center biblical interpretation around the experiences of black women. Therefore, Williams primarily utilizes Hagar's perspective in her effort to show the parallels between Hagar's story and black women's issues.

### ***Hagar as a Model of Black Womanhood***

Motherhood is the first issue addressed in *Sisters in the Wilderness* because it has remained salient to black women throughout history. The interaction between the triadic structure of oppression affecting black women is seen in Hagar's African descent and her low societal and economic status as a female slave. Sarah's long-term struggle with barrenness leads to Hagar's forced experience of motherhood. As a slave, she has no control over her assignment in Genesis 16:2-3 to serve as a surrogate for Sarah by conceiving a child with Abraham. The implications of Hagar's entry into motherhood for black women can be traced to the experiences of female African-American slaves who suffered rape at the hands of their slave owners.<sup>119</sup> This characterized black women's historical lack of agency concerning their role as mothers.

Williams then shifts to evaluate the application of traditional gender roles in the lives of slave women. Black motherhood was vastly different from the model of motherhood in white society because of slavery. The unique family dynamics of the African-American community

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 37.

were characterized by conditions that required slave women to fill roles traditionally occupied by men, such as that of protector and provider. Williams explains:

It was the black mother who often protected the children and family as far as they could be protected during slavery. It was a black female nurturer, called Moses by her people, who led regiments and scouted for the Union Army during the American Civil War. Sometimes it was the slave mother who was given permission by the slave master to operate her own business and thereby provide economic security for her children.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, slavery forced black women to take on any additional roles necessary to ensure the survival of their children and themselves. God and religion were also fundamental aspects of black women's lives because of God's ability to fulfill the needs that black men and the slave community had failed to meet.<sup>121</sup>

Although Hagar's story serves as an example of black motherhood, it also leads to the womanist understanding of Hagar as a model of black womanhood. Williams describes the significance of Hagar as a realistic portrait of non-middle-class black womanhood.<sup>122</sup> This was characterized by traits such as, "independence; endurance when endurance gives no promise; the stamina to hold things together for the family (even without the help of a mate); the ability, in poverty, to make a way out of no way..."<sup>123</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the traditional, submissive American ideal of true womanhood that was primarily accessible to middle-and-upper-class white women. However, Williams explains that the notions of true womanhood eventually reached African-American community through educated, upper-class black people. They championed the image of the Virgin Mary as their model of true womanhood, an adopted

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

ideal that was still largely unattainable to poor black women.<sup>124</sup> The conflicting models of black womanhood seen in the Bible through Hagar and the Virgin Mary illustrate the impact of class differences on the qualities and actions of black women. Therefore, it is important to understand the critical role of poverty and oppression in constructing the model of black womanhood seen in Hagar's story.<sup>125</sup> Social and economic insecurity were roots in the struggle for survival that led to the development of the strong, independent black woman.

### ***Hagar's Encounter with God***

Exploring the relationship between black women and the divine is a key aspect of womanist theology. According to Grant, there are two main sources of black women's understanding of God: "first, God's revelation directly to them, and secondly, God's revelation as witnessed in the Bible and as read and heard in the context of their experience."<sup>126</sup> The divine revelation Hagar receives directly from God informs the womanist understanding of black women's reliance on the divine. In Genesis 16:7, after Hagar flees Abraham's house, she has a divine encounter with the angel of the Lord in the desert. However, Williams notes that in this case, God's response to Hagar's situation is not one of liberation.<sup>127</sup> Liberation would entail Hagar's freedom from Abraham and Sarah, as the original sources of her oppression. Instead, God instructs Hagar to return to their home. Williams interprets this as God's method of ensuring Hagar's survival, which would not have been possible if she chose to remain in the wilderness.<sup>128</sup> Although Hagar has not been liberated from her situation, she responds positively

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>126</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 211.

<sup>127</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 20.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

to the angel's promise concerning her impending birth because it is the means through which her survival and quality of life will be maintained. The promise from the angel of the Lord states:

You are now pregnant  
and you will give birth to a son.  
You shall name him Ishmael,  
for the Lord has heard of your misery.  
He will be a wild donkey of a man;  
his hand will be against everyone  
and everyone's hand against him,  
and he will live in hostility  
toward all his brothers. (Genesis 16:11–12)

Thus, Hagar will survive and give birth a son named Ishmael, and his character will support their future survival and quality of life.<sup>129</sup>

After this, she proceeds to memorialize God's presence with her in the midst of her pain and suffering by "naming" God. In verse 13 Hagar states, "You are the God who sees me," naming him El Roi which is Hebrew for the God who sees. Williams' *survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation* resurfaces through Hagar's discovery of a God that is aware of her situation and ready to respond to her despondent state. Grant's belief that "the Bible must be read and interpreted in light of Black women's own experience of oppression and God's revelation within that context"<sup>130</sup> is evident in womanist engagement with the life of Hagar.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>130</sup> Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 212.

In the second account of Hagar's story in Genesis 21, Williams seeks to connect the overarching themes of survival and quality of life to autonomy, and its importance in the lives of black women. Hagar is expelled from Abraham's home by Sarah and is now a female slave and single mother suffering from homelessness and poverty. Once again, in the wilderness she encounters the presence of God in the midst of her despair. She is reassured that God has heard their cries of desperation and is reminded of the first promise made in Genesis 16 when God says, "Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation" (Genesis 21:18). Hagar and Ishmael's autonomy is realized through the statement in verse 20 that God was with Ishmael as he grew up.<sup>131</sup> The significance of the presence of God to the Black community's understanding of faith is highlighted through God's active participation in their moments of greatest struggle, which take place in their "wilderness." Williams' assesses this idea of the wilderness as a symbolic experience within the Black community in great depth.

### ***The Role of the Wilderness in the Black Community***

The wilderness is the figurative term for the setting where religious experiences occur. Historically, it was through challenging situations, where black women had only their faith as a source of support, that God was able to make a way out of no way.<sup>132</sup> The wilderness closely links the experiences of African-American women throughout history with the biblical story of Hagar, which provides insight on the ideas forming the basis of womanist theology. Williams explains, "we can speak of Hagar and many African-American women as sisters in the wilderness struggling for life, and by the help of their God coming to terms with situations that have destructive potential."<sup>133</sup> Moreover, black women's interactions with the African-American

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<sup>131</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 30.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

community, which is composed of oppressed males and females, has shaped their religious experiences.<sup>134</sup> In order to understand the experiences of black women informing womanist theology, we must recognize the influence of their faith in God and their struggles as members of the Black community.

Hagar's experience in the wilderness is coined by Williams as "Hagar-wilderness symbolism" which represents the past, present, and future realities of the Black community's relationship to the wilderness.<sup>135</sup> During slavery, this concept of the wilderness led slaves to physically isolate themselves from the environment they were familiar with in order to encounter God in a sacred space.<sup>136</sup> Their wilderness experience was generally documented as positive because of its role in helping slaves strengthen their faith in God. However, post-slavery, the wilderness became a negative experience that was associated with the harsh realities of the social and economic oppression the Black community faced after their emancipation.<sup>137</sup> Williams posits that within African-American culture, Hagar's story represented both the positive and negative Black religious experiences of the wilderness.

The wilderness is also significant because it connects to black women's struggle for autonomy, as seen in the second account of Hagar's story. Black women's wilderness experience provides an environment for resistance and rebellion, which contributes to their autonomy.<sup>138</sup> Williams explains that God's promises of "survival, freedom and nationhood for Hagar's progeny," despite her isolated state and lack of resources while in the wilderness, serves as an encouragement to the Black community. This is based on the collective Black struggle for

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

survival, freedom, and nationhood while facing poverty and oppression. Thus, Hagar's story is a paradigm to understand how black women are able to overcome their struggle and oppression through encountering God in the wilderness.

### ***Womanist Challenges of Black Liberation Theology***

Williams assessment of the methodological issues present within Black liberation theology also provides a more detailed understanding of womanist engagement with the Bible. She models womanist critique of biblical text by first evaluating how the oppressed in the Bible do not always experience liberation from God.<sup>139</sup> As previously seen in Hagar's story, in Genesis 16:9 she is not fully liberated from her situation by God after being instructed to return to her oppressors. Williams defines this as just one instance where God's liberating power fails to be realized in the lives of "the oppressed of the oppressed," who are typically non-Hebrews and slaves.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, womanist engagement with the Bible is particularly focused on the perspectives of the most vulnerable and marginalized people. This is in line with the womanist goal to utilize black women's experience as a group suffering under multiple systems of oppression to understand all oppressed communities.

Williams challenges black theologians' norm of interpreting scripture to depict God solely as the liberator of victims of injustice by highlighting biblical passages on the lives of non-Hebrew slaves, such as Hagar.<sup>141</sup> Black liberation theology's misattribution of liberation stands in opposition to the purpose of womanist thought to critique "the dominant philosophical, theological, and canonical assumptions of Christianity that enable social oppression and limit

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

human agency.”<sup>142</sup> In order to reconcile her issues with the perspective of Black liberation theologians, Williams encourages their theological engagement in a womanist hermeneutic.

She stresses the role of critique in womanist interpretation by questioning what has become normative in the Black community’s understanding of God.<sup>143</sup> Black theologians’ engagement with the Bible has a heavy focus on solely the Hebrew’s understanding of God, as seen in their concentration on Israel when evaluating the exodus story. The Egyptians role in the exodus story as the primary oppressor of the Israelites influences black theologians’ failure to critically evaluate the violent acts of God against the people of Egypt. This is just one example of Williams’ critique of the uncritical use of the Bible by the Black church and Black liberation theologians. Their biblical interpretation overlooks the oppressed of the oppressed, which commonly describes the “non-Hebrew female slave” womanist theologians most directly identify with. Williams explains that “this black way of identifying with God solely through the exodus of the Hebrews and Jesus’ reported words in Luke belongs to the black historical period of American slavery.”<sup>144</sup> This approach is problematic when considering that the experience of God by the Black community has evolved since the end of slavery. Thus, womanist theologians believe theological discourse should not remain restricted to an antiquated understanding.

### ***Redeeming the Visibility of Black Women through Inclusivity***

From the womanists’ perspective, inclusivity is paramount to mediate the methodological issues found within Black liberation theology. In order to fully integrate black women’s experience, Williams asserts that black theologians must engage with “women’s re/production history.”<sup>145</sup> This form of history includes all that women “think, create, use and pass on through

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<sup>142</sup> Lippy and Williams, “Religious Thought: Womanist,” 5.

<sup>143</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 133.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.



their labor for the sake of women's and the family's well-being.”<sup>146</sup> It also defines black women’s significant role within the context of family, considers the value of autonomy and resistance in their lives, and encompasses the role of race in the Black community’s oppression and survival. Women's re/production history is the means through which the overarching black experience becomes an inclusive wilderness experience both males and females can identify with.

Black women’s inclusion in theological discourse also shows the importance of improving the visibility of black women’s experience. Their ability to reclaim their theological voice that was absent within white feminist and Black liberation theology is achieved through “recovering and honoring the lost voices of enslaved women and the stories of resistance by black women.”<sup>147</sup> Womanist theologians’ inclusive exploration of Hagar’s story exemplifies their effort to represent the struggles and triumphs of the overlooked and undervalued.

Williams explains that it is important to redeem black women’s life experiences from invisibility to create the woman-inclusive wilderness experience that black male liberation theologians have previously overlooked or ignored.<sup>148</sup> Thus, the significance of the biblical wilderness tradition re-emerges as a foundational idea of womanist theology. This is not only because of the parallels between Hagar’s story and black women’s experience, but also because of its connection to the other womanist theme of survival and quality of life.<sup>149</sup> The *survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation* can be captured by God’s ability to make a way out of no way in the midst of black women’s wilderness.

The encounter of black women with God in the wilderness leads to the provision of resources necessary to ensure their survival. This pattern is seen when Hagar engages with the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Nesson, “Liberation Theologies in America.”

<sup>148</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 150.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 142.

presence of God in the second account of her story in Genesis 21. She encounters God amid her devastation after running out of water and realizing her son Ishmael will die in the desert. After Hagar is instructed by God to return to the place she left her son, “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.”<sup>150</sup>

Through her encounter with God, Hagar is made aware of resources she was not previously able to access, which depicts how God made a way out of no way in order to support her survival and quality of life. Williams summarizes this womanist hermeneutical principle as “God's word of survival and quality of life to oppressed communities (or families) living in a diaspora.”<sup>151</sup> The womanist focus on survival as a means to liberation conveys the difference between womanist and Black liberation theologians, especially when considering the distinct biblical stories they identify with.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams frames womanist theology through its engagement with the biblical story of Hagar, African-American community, and Black liberation theology. The themes of the struggle for survival and quality of life present in Hagar's story are reflected in the womanist survival/quality-of-life tradition. Through this hermeneutic, womanist engagement with the Bible from the perspective of the oppressed of the oppressed, such as non-Hebrew female slaves, supports a women-inclusive wilderness experience. The symbolism of the wilderness for the Black community illustrates the importance of encounters with God to see God make a way out of no way during their situations of struggle. Therefore, the mission of womanist theology to increase inclusivity within feminist and black theological discourse is pursued through its focus on improving the visibility of black women and their experiences.

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<sup>150</sup> Genesis 21:19

<sup>151</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 171.

### *Womanist Theology & Family*

Williams' evaluation of Hagar as a model of black womanhood and motherhood reflects the distinct historical experiences of black families. Enslaved women like Hagar grew accustomed to female-headed family structures because of the unique struggles they faced as the oppressed of the oppressed. Therefore, unlike white evangelical feminists, womanists' biblical engagement focuses on the meaning of family because of their ability to relate to the non-traditional family structures of the oppressed in the Bible. Womanist theologians do not primarily address the household codes or other scriptures invoked to support traditional gender roles by their white feminist counterparts. Instead, they focus on the biblical stories that best represent their marginalized experiences to interpret how God provides in the midst of their wilderness. This also illustrates the way God's provision supplements the resources black women may lack as single parents. I will further explore the significance of race in constructing the traditional family in the following chapter on the family values movement.

## Chapter 4: The Family Values Movement

In this final chapter, I explore the religious basis of white conservative evangelicals' profamily agenda. I show how their criticism of mainstream feminism and feminist theology resulted in advocacy for the "traditional" American family. I also evaluate how organizations like the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family engaged in social and political activism for family values. Lastly, I assess the significance of race within the Religious Right and the family values movement.

### The Religious Right

#### *Background on Evangelicalism*

Although the rise of the Religious Right began in 1976 during Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign, the Religious Right was not linked with the Republican party until Ronald Reagan's candidacy in 1980. White conservative Protestant evangelicals dominated the membership of the Religious Right and organizations involved in the family values movement. Historian Margaret Bendroth defines the four theological beliefs of evangelicals as "the primacy of biblical authority, the necessity of conversion, the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus, and a mandate for activism in the world."<sup>152</sup> Although this activism has typically focused on spreading the Christian gospel, it is also evident in the Religious Right's social and political activism for local and federal legislation that aligns with their biblical worldview.

A core group of evangelicals also identify as fundamentalists. Christian fundamentalism "emphasized the 'fundamentals' of Christian orthodoxy, insisting on the inerrancy of scripture,

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<sup>152</sup> Bendroth, "Evangelicals, Family, and Modernity," 58.

the divinity of Christ, His virgin birth, and the reality of scriptural miracles.”<sup>153</sup> Fundamentalists also believed in the separation of church and state, which influenced their historical absence from political activity.<sup>154</sup> They actively preached against Christian involvement in the civil rights movement which led to a struggle between fundamentalism and Christianity focused on the social gospel, which supported God’s advocacy for the oppressed through social justice activism.<sup>155</sup> The historic link between separatism and fundamentalism began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s after prominent fundamentalists, like Jerry Falwell, became involved in social activism for family values.

### ***The Moral Majority***

The Moral Majority, a Christian political action organization, led the profamily agenda that defined the family values movement. Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979. They defined the family as “the fundamental building block and the basic unit of our society, and its continued health is a prerequisite for a healthy and prosperous nation.” This understanding of the family unit was undoubtedly influenced by the evolving American society in the 70s. According to evangelicals, the sexual revolution, drug use, and crime were evidence of the diminished value of family and morals in society.

After a number of Supreme Court rulings in the 60s advanced legislation that dismantled traditional structures, evangelical discontent with perceived moral decline led to their political action for family values.<sup>156</sup> Conservative evangelicals viewed cases such as *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abingdon School District v. Schempp* (1963) as attacks on religion and morals because they ruled that mandatory prayer and bible reading in public schools was

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<sup>153</sup> McVicar, “The Religious Right in America.”

<sup>154</sup> Dowland, “‘Family Values’ and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda,” 616.

<sup>155</sup> Johnson, “African Americans and Religion.”

<sup>156</sup> Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 7.

unconstitutional.<sup>157</sup> The legalization of abortion through *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 also played a significant role in the formal political mobilization of the Religious Right towards the end of the 70s.

The family values movement represented white conservative evangelicals' political, social, and moral commitment to the traditional American family. Their understanding of the traditional family was directly linked to morality, which allowed the Religious Right to lobby and legislate in "defense of the family."<sup>158</sup> They responded to the perceived tripartite attack on traditional family values occasioned by feminism, abortion, and gay rights.<sup>159</sup> Their social and political activism also challenged the perceived harmful effects of welfare on the institution of family.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, the Religious Right's agenda largely reflected concerns of a homogeneous demographic represented by predominantly white, middle-class evangelicals.

White conservative evangelicals also dominated Focus on the Family, a Christian ministry founded by psychologist James Dobson in 1977. Dobson defined the family as a "godly ordained, gendered order that define authority: male authority in the family and parental authority at home, free from government interference," which reflected the support of many evangelicals for biblically defined gender roles.<sup>161</sup> Conservative evangelicals' critique of feminism and feminist theology is rooted in this idea of a gendered order, which they understood to be mandated in scripture.

### ***Feminist Critique***

The Religious Right was strongly antifeminist because they believed women's equality

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<sup>157</sup> McVicar, "The Religious Right in America."

<sup>158</sup> Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," 608.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>160</sup> Stephens, *Family Matters: James Dobson and Focus on the Family's Crusade for the Christian Home*, 8.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

was unbiblical and a threat to traditional family values. White conservative evangelicals actively opposed two specific items on the feminist agenda, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and abortion access. Phyllis Schlafly, a prominent antifeminist and the founder of STOP ERA, led those opposing the ratification of the ERA based on her belief that it would eliminate “the traditional family concept of husband as breadwinner and wife as homemaker.”<sup>162</sup> She called it “the first anti-family amendment in the Constitution,” which supported the Religious Right’s political mission to defend the family institution.<sup>163</sup>

White conservative evangelicals also viewed women’s access to abortion as an assault on motherhood.<sup>164</sup> They considered motherhood to be “women’s biological destiny” based on the distinct gender roles outlined in the Bible.<sup>165</sup> Legalized abortion, therefore, endangered the family structure authorized in the Bible. Evangelicals particularly opposed language describing abortion as “a woman’s choice” as it contradicted their biblical understanding of a gendered order defining authority in the family.<sup>166</sup> They affirmed “male headship,” which originates in the household codes discussed in the previous chapter. Male headship supports the husband as “the divinely appointed leader of the family, chosen by God to be the spiritual leader of his wife and children.”<sup>167</sup> Commitment to male headship can be seen in the Moral Majority’s formal opposition to abortion in the 1988 Family Manifesto:

We deny that governments, international organizations, private pressure groups, or other interest groups, have any right to intrude upon parents in their reproductive choices, or to

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<sup>162</sup> Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 145.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 123

<sup>167</sup> Bendroth, “Evangelicals, Family, and Modernity,” 58.

coerce them to undergo abortion, contraceptive medication, or sterilization, or to control, limit, or enforce family size in any other way whatsoever.

We proclaim that parental responsibility for reproductive decisions is joint. Hence

We deny that reproduction is solely a “woman’s choice”<sup>168</sup>

Evangelical feminists, who affirmed scriptural authority but questioned male headship, resisted the Moral Majority’s strong position. They sought to revise “the notions of husbands’ headship and wives’ domesticity that have dominated evangelical discourse on gender.”<sup>169</sup>

Because evangelical feminists affirmed women’s equality with men, most evangelicals concluded they were “a Christianized version of secular feminism” and, therefore, an attack on the traditional family.<sup>170</sup> Conservative evangelicals also believed feminism was one of the primary attacks on the traditional American family because of secular feminists’ rejection of biblical gender norms and support for abortion access.<sup>171</sup> Moreover, unlike womanist theologians, evangelical feminists hardly addressed the meaning of family because of their narrow focus on gender roles and desire to uphold the doctrine of the traditional Christian religion. Despite their efforts, most evangelicals avoided being associated with any form of feminist theology, resulting in the marginalization of evangelical feminists.

Conservative evangelicals, especially those with fundamentalist leanings, scrutinized evangelical feminists’ method of biblical interpretation. They rejected evangelical feminists’ practice of reading and interpreting scripture based on the historical, social, and cultural context in which it was written. They held to the fundamentalist commitment to biblical inerrancy, which meant they believed the Bible can and must be read literally. Therefore, fundamentalists:

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<sup>168</sup> Jerry Falwell Library, “Family Manifesto.”

<sup>169</sup> Gallagher, “The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism,” 218.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>171</sup> Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 130.



viewed with suspicion any attempts to interpret scripture via an analysis of its cultural or historic setting. Instead, adopting what they considered a straightforward reading of the texts, fundamentalists rejected the efforts of feminist Christians to emphasize the cultural relativity of New Testament proscriptions against women's teaching and the notion of women's subordination.<sup>172</sup>

Liberation feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza addressed fundamentalists' reliance on "proof texts," which identifies scripture taken out of context to "legitimate predetermined dogmas, principles, or institutions of the Church."<sup>173</sup> Fiorenza maintained that many of the household codes that justified women's second-class citizenship, were utilized as proof texts.

Although evangelical feminists offered biblical interpretations of scripture they believed supported gender equality, the majority of conservative evangelicals viewed gender roles as complementarian. The complementary roles of men and women, as seen in the household codes, were defined as "equal but different."<sup>174</sup> Conservative evangelicals argued, then, that "gender egalitarianism undermined the authority of the Bible by claiming that texts related to gender were culturally relative rather than timeless truths."<sup>175</sup> Thus, evangelicals within the family values movement believed that God ordained complementarianism and the household codes were universal, rather than culturally specific, guidelines.

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<sup>172</sup> Gallagher, "The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism," 222.

<sup>173</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 26

<sup>174</sup> Gallagher, "The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism," 228.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

## **The Implications of Race**

### ***Female-headed Households***

The state of the Black family in the United States in the 70s and 80s was at the forefront of national media. Daniel Moynihan's 1965 report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," resurfaced in the national conversation about race during the family values movement.<sup>176</sup> Moynihan attributed the absence of fathers and the matriarchal structure of black families to the instability within the Black community. By 1986, black children were three-times as likely to live in female-headed households than white children.<sup>177</sup> White conservative evangelicals championed the patriarchal role of fathers as the head of the family and breadwinner, but the nation was marked by the large number of black female-headed households. Thus, conservative evangelicals contrasted black families with the "traditional American family," which was based on the normative family structure of the white middle-class. White conservative evangelicals' support for male headship contributed to the myth that the matriarchal structure of black families was responsible for their instability. In reality, female-headed households are frequently linked to poverty through the feminization of poverty. Divorce, single parenthood, and births by unmarried mothers were all strongly correlated with the feminization of poverty.<sup>178</sup>

In addition to the Moynihan Report, the 1986 CBS News broadcast, "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America," also contributed to the portrayal of black families as the antithesis of family values. This news report focused on unstable, impoverished black families on welfare. In response to the program, a reporter for the *Focus on the Family* magazine

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<sup>176</sup> Stephens, *Family Matters*, 128.

<sup>177</sup> Edelman, "Save the CHILDREN," 53.

<sup>178</sup> Browning and Browning, "The Church and the Family Crisis."

discussed how the national welfare system “penalizes families who have a mother and father under the same roof” in favor of promoting “single mothers living off welfare instead of encouraging fathers to provide for their children.”<sup>179</sup> White conservative evangelicals’ rejected and attacked the federal welfare system because of its perceived harm to family values. Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign also popularized the “welfare queens” rhetoric which primarily stereotyped poor, single black mothers. However, Reagan and other members of the Religious Right overlooked the considerable influence of race and class on the demographics of welfare recipients. The Religious Right assumed white families as not only the norm, but also the ideal. This led to their continued criticism of black families, especially mothers.

### ***Black Motherhood***

The impact of race on women’s experience of motherhood was largely neglected by the family values movement. White conservative evangelicals stringently opposed abortion based on their understanding of motherhood as a duty that was divinely ordained by God. Their biblically-based belief in motherhood as women’s social and biological destiny failed to assess the different experiences of motherhood for all women. The Religious Right’s limited focus on the experiences of white middle-class women mirrors the eighteenth and nineteenth century ideals of republican motherhood and true womanhood, which focused on upper- and middle-class white women.

Womanists’ understanding of black motherhood, on the other hand, is rooted in their historical experience of slavery. The previous chapter explains how womanist theologians engage with biblical stories centered on the “oppressed of the oppressed” as they best represent the tri-dimensional oppression black women face on account of race, class, and gender.

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<sup>179</sup> Stephens, *Family Matters*, 132.

Womanist scholars' analysis of the biblical story of Hagar explores slave women's forced experiences of motherhood and ability to adapt within non-traditional family structures. Hagar's struggles as a single mother in the wilderness is applied by womanists to represent the experiences of black women in America, especially lower-class, single black mothers. Their resiliency is supported by extended family networks, the community within the Black church, and their faith in God.

In contrast, the white evangelical view of motherhood as a divine duty failed to integrate the experiences of women in non-traditional families. They opposed federal welfare and government-funded daycare based on their belief that these policies would "denigrate women's primary responsibility for rearing children."<sup>180</sup> However, these policies provide social support networks that are necessary to support vulnerable families in America.<sup>181</sup> Therefore, the Religious Right's social and political action against issues such as welfare disregarded the struggles of lower class, non-white Americans.

### ***Black Evangelicals***

The long history of the Black church and the significance of the Christian faith to Black Americans is evident in the number of black evangelicals in America. In fact, "virtually all black churches were as biblically conservative (i.e., viewing the Bible as an inerrant book of divine instruction) as the most conservative subset of white Christian churches."<sup>182</sup> Even so, white evangelicals, especially those associated with the Religious Right, have typically overlooked their black co-religionists. However, there are some exceptions to this trend. James Dobson was eventually challenged for Focus on the Family's failure to address the concerns of families that

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<sup>180</sup> Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 149.

<sup>181</sup> McAdoo, "Changes in the Formation and Structure of Black Families," 23.

<sup>182</sup> Johnson, "African Americans and Religion."

were not white or middle class.<sup>183</sup> This led to his work with conservative black evangelicals to show the positive impact of conservative, Christian family values on racial minorities. Focus on the Family attempted to show that the universal and biblical values of family were shared by *both* blacks and whites. In spite of this, Dobson's effort was the exception rather than the rule.

Civil rights leaders have suggested a more malicious motivation for the Religious Right's advocacy for family values, especially as they ignored, if not harmed, black families. They view "conservative assaults on social welfare as a new version of white supremacy, not as the benign support for 'family values' white evangelicals trumpeted."<sup>184</sup> Although black evangelicals agreed with aspects of the family values agenda, a majority did not join the Christian right because of its historical racial homogeneity, disregard to class, and opposition to civil rights activism.<sup>185</sup> The Religious Right's omission of race and class when advocating for traditional gender roles and family values reflected their white middle-class membership and targeted audience. In the limited cases that race and class were addressed during the family values movement, it was primarily negative attention focused on lower-class, impoverished black families, as opposed to stable ones. Overall, black families were expected to fit into the mold of white family values, and pathologized for their failure to do so.

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<sup>183</sup> Stephens, *Family Matters*, 133.

<sup>184</sup> Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 215.

<sup>185</sup> Stephens, *Family Matters*, 132.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I analyze how feminist and womanist theologians invoke family and women's role within it based on their biblical interpretation. I also assess white conservative evangelicals response to feminist theology and the significance of race within the family values movement. Although the Religious Right amplified the importance of the family unit through their profamily rhetoric, their political advocacy reflected the white middle-class individuals dominating their membership. Therefore, their commitment to defending family values in America failed to represent the lived experiences of *all* Americans, especially lower-class families of color.

The findings of my research convey the importance of intersectionality, which emphasizes the multidimensional structure of discrimination and privilege. The womanist focus on race, class, and gender depicts the unique experiences of black women that were overlooked by the family values movement because they failed to fit the ideal of the "traditional American family." Most of the national attention between the 1960s and the 1980s on the perceived destruction of the Black family primarily focused on lower-class black families living in poverty, as opposed to stable ones. This leads me to conclude that class, which was scarcely included in the discourse of the family values movement, is just as important as race when considering whose family matters.

My study of womanist theology also influenced my focus on the overlooked experiences of black women throughout this thesis. However, I briefly address how lack feminists and womanists integrate the additional oppression of sexual orientation into their work. My research is limited in its heterocentric evaluation of gender roles, family structures, and the question of

whose family matters. Therefore, an assessment on the impact of sexual orientation on the construction of family is an area for future inquiry.

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## **Biography**

Danielle Nwosa is a proud Nigerian-American from Houston, Texas. She is graduating from The University of Texas at Austin with a B.S.A. in Human Development and Family Sciences and a B.A. in Plan II Honors. In her free time, she enjoys singing, snacking, and spending time with friends. After graduation, she is excited to move to Boston to work as an associate consultant at a nonprofit consulting firm.