

# Questions of Gender in French and European Protestantism

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## ABSTRACT

Questions of gender in French and European Protestantism revolve around three poles: participation in struggles within society for equal rights, inclusion and equality in Churches, and the production of feminist or LGBT theologies. Protestants took part in women's earliest struggles during the nineteenth century but did so without producing a feminist theology. As the question of women's access to pastoral ministry emerged during the first half of the twentieth century, female youth movements formed, leading to the creation of a Protestant feminism during the 1960s that was active in the fight for contraception and abortion. The first feminist theologies truly blossomed during the 1970s, particularly in Germany. LGBT Christian movements were born during the same period, especially in Great Britain in dialogue with the United States. In Churches, the debates concentrated on access for LGBT individuals to the ministry as priests, and requests for blessings for same-sex unions.



The consecration of two new bishops in the Church of Sweden by Archbishop Antje Jackelén (centre): Johan Dalman, Bishop of Strängnäs (left), and Mikael Mogren, Bishop of Västerås (right), Uppsala Cathedral, September 6, 2015.

While the beginnings of a feminist theology emphasizing a non-patriarchal reading of the Bible and images of God appeared in the Anglo-Saxon world in the late nineteenth century, questions of gender emerged within French Protestantism through engagement in the social and political field. Women from the Protestant philanthropic

bourgeoisie (Jenny d'Héricourt 1809-1875, Henriette de Witt-Guizot 1829-1908) committed themselves in 1848 to *La Voix des femmes* [The Voice of Women] (a feminist daily advocating political equality for women and men), La Société pour l'émancipation des femmes [Women's Liberation Society] (demanding financial independence), or the fight against prostitution. The Conseil national des femmes [the National Women's Council]—presided over by Sarah Monod (1836-1912) and Julie Siegfried (1848-1922)—marked the transition in 1901 from philanthropy to social and political action. A long struggle began in Churches for women's access to the ministry as priests. While English Congregationalist Churches accepted women in 1917, this acceptance spread throughout Europe only during the 1960s, initially in Scandinavia, Germany, and Switzerland, and later in France (1966) and Belgium (1969). This was not always the case in most evangelical churches. In 2013, for the first time a woman—Antje Jackelén (born in 1955)—became the Archbishop governing the Lutheran Church of Sweden, and in January 2015, the first female bishop, Libby Lane (born in 1966), was ordained within the Church of England. In 2017, Emmanuelle Seyboldt (born in 1970) became the president of the Église protestante unie de France.

In the early twentieth century, Protestant youth movements opened up to women, such as the committees of the "Fédé" [Federation] of French Protestant students beginning in 1908. In 1911, the Union chrétienne des jeunes filles (UCJF) [the Union for Young Christian Women] was founded in France. Girl scouts, who were initially excluded from scouting by its founder Baden-Powell (1857-1941), formed their own groups, doing so first in England in 1910. In the aftermath of the Second World War, these youth movements played a central role in the creation of the WCC in 1948 (the World Council of Churches, primarily bringing together Protestant and Orthodox Churches from across the globe), which discussed women's role in Churches during its first congress.

The Jeunes Femmes [Young Women] movement emerged from these associations, became independent, and fought for contraception and the struggle for abortion. In 1956, its members helped created "la Maternité heureuse" [Happy Maternity] for the right to contraception, which in 1960 became the Mouvement français pour le planning familial (MFPF) [French Movement for Family Planning]. The Protestant Simone Iff (1924-1994) became its president in 1973 and contributed that same year to the creation of the MLAC (Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception) [Movement for the Freedom of Abortion and Contraception], for which she served as vice president.

These evolutions were reflected in theological debates. The primarily Catholic "theology of femininity," which was written by men to celebrate the eternal feminine of mothers and wives, was followed by a first wave of French feminist theology, which was portrayed in the 1967 book *L'autre semblable* [The Similar Other] by Francine Dumas (1917-1999), who was one of the leaders of Jeunes Femmes, where she criticized the hierarchical order and sexual stereotypes.

During the 1970s, the struggle for abortion, the rise of political contestation, movements of the left in Protestantism, and the influence of American feminism radicalized the positions of female theologians, such as the Germans Elisabeth Moltmann (born in 1926) and Dorothee Sölle (1929-2003). Feminist theologies came in the wake of the liberation theology that emerged from the socio-political struggles of the Third World, notably in Latin America from 1960 to 1980. Traditional theology set out from concepts and/or readings of the Bible to analyse social reality, an approach referred to as "inductive." Conversely, feminist theologies defined themselves as "contextual" or "deductive" theologies, as they set out from the experience of women's oppression, and took their place in the struggles for freedom, from which they re-read the biblical text and theological concepts.

This approach resulted in a feminist reading of the Bible, a product of its time: female theologians, such as Corinne Lanoir (born in 1959), challenged patriarchal interpretations and attempted to undermine the bases from which sexist theological and anthropological constructs emanated. As a result, they called into question the centuries-long tradition which emphasized certain writings, male characters, and subjects, thereby producing the invisibility of female figures. Works were published on women in the Book of Judges, matriarchs, and non-masculine images

for God. For instance, in the Old Testament, there is greater emphasis on God's *ruah* (spirit, soul, life breath) or *shekinah* (immanent presence) rather than God's power. Emphasis was placed on the many biblical passages using the image of the Mother rather than the Father to describe God. The German woman Elga Sorge (born in 1940) attempted to replace Judaism, the religion of the father, and Christianity, the religion of the son, with a "*théosophie*," the religion of the Goddess. Dorothee Sölle stressed the need to break with the representation of God the Father, without for all that replacing him with a feminine image. She also laid claim to mystical images beyond gender, such as the abyss, the source, or the ocean, for a shared liberation of men and women in messianic times when there would be neither patriarchy nor matriarchy, as all domination of humans over humans will have ceased.

During the early 1970s, the first gay Christian associations were created, such as David et Jonathan in France (1972), or the Communauté du Christ libérateur [the Community of Christ the Liberator] in Belgium (1974). However, the theological development stemming from the experience of LGBT life was primarily produced between the United States and Great Britain. Initially inspired by liberal theology, it involved securing the acceptance of homosexuals by religious institutions through a non-dissenting approach of integration. A gay and lesbian liberation theology began to develop in the late 1970s. The British sociologist Malcolm Macourt (born in 1950) identified with it in his work *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation* (1977). These theologians underscored the struggle against homophobia and AIDS to produce a theology that was more dissenting toward the mechanisms of power and normalization used by Churches. During the 1990s, a queer theology challenged gender categories themselves, and denounced the role of Churches in their essentialization, such as the theologian Elizabeth Stuart (born in 1963). They all denounced homophobic interpretations of biblical texts.

Protestantism in Europe is profoundly divided on the LGBT question in the twenty-first century. While historical Protestant Churches are gradually accepting the presence of LGBT ministers, and are blessing same-sex unions, "evangelical" churches are strongly opposed. They are often in the front lines of demonstrations against same-sex marriage, which serves as a marker for them, as they believe that supporting equal rights would represent a distancing from the foundations of Christian faith.

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