

FAITH AND FEMINISM: SACRED-SECULAR ALLIANCES, HOLY AND UNHOLY  
Rita Nakashima Brock  
Women's Funding Conference, Dec. 5-7, 2005

This fall, I was just leaving a meeting of a working group of secular and religious feminists in Atlanta, organized by Amy Caiazza of the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), when Kathleen Hurty ask me to be on this panel today. It had been a good, productive conversation, and some of my remarks today are based on that conversation.

To be honest, I have to say that women of faith sometimes avoid a close association with feminist issues and causes for a number of reasons. For women of color, justice includes overcoming racism, and feminist rhetoric can alienate our male allies, so some of us avoid it. Liberal feminism, the most public face of feminism, assumes many of the secular values of competitive capitalism, which are at odds with religious values that stress commitment to community and service to a larger good. Also, many feminists working in nonreligious feminist organizations participate in a religious tradition, but do not know the work of feminists in their religion, so they don't support it.

Linell Cady, a feminist professor of religion at Arizona State University and a member of the IWPR group, noted that, in the past several decades, a new, hard secularism has emerged in progressive circles. Earlier, secularism was open to the participation of explicitly religious people. With the political ascendancy of the religious right and media attention to it, religion is now often equated with their narrow agenda. Hence, hard secularism is hostile to religion—i. e. it has succumbed to the propaganda machine of the religious right.

In avoiding a public role for religious feminists, secular feminists are in danger of forgetting the long history of women of faith in social movements. We have worked for abolition, women's suffrage, civil rights, and reproductive rights—a history revealed in Helen

Hunt's book, *Faith and Feminism*. Protestant women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed their own church agencies and collected their own funds to advance women's concerns. When they fought for women's suffrage, money to oppose them came especially from the alcohol and tobacco companies. A little-told story of *Roe v. Wade* is that it started in a Dallas church basement where a group of Unitarian Universalist women decided something had to be done about the horrors of illegal abortions. Women move churches in progressive directions and have done so for centuries.

For me, one of the biggest surprises coming out of the IWPR conversation in Atlanta was how little secular feminists know about what religious feminists have been up against the last 30 years. Rightwing secular funders, such as Coors, Olin, Bradley, and Scaife, have invested billions of dollars to create 5 think tanks on religion as an arm of conservative politics, which has hundreds of think tanks.<sup>1</sup> The attached chart shows what has happened to the U.S. during the time of their creation and activity.

The IRD, by far the powerhouse of the five, was created in 1981 to destroy mainline Protestantism (they claim they are renewing Protestantism's social and political witness for better democracy). The IRD has trained people in denominations to get their delegates elected to committees and boards. The IRD funded the creation or expansion of right wing caucuses, such as the Presbyterian Layman, Episcopal Action, and the Methodist Good News and Confessing Movements. Each of these has funding to publish and mass mail publications, with material

---

<sup>1</sup>The Five Think Tanks on Religion: 1) The Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD), 2) the Acton Institute, 3) the Institute on Religion and Public Life, 4) the Faith and Reason Institute, and 5) the Ethics and Public Policy Center. See *Axis of Ideology: Conservative Foundations and Public Policy*, March 2004, available from the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy, <http://www.ncrp.org>, which details the effective philanthropic strategies that 79 conservative foundations have used to support the activities of 350 public policy-oriented right-wing think tanks at the federal, state, and local levels. The report is available for purchase in two formats - either as a PDF file or a printed version. The NCRP's *Funding the Culture Wars: Philanthropy, Church and State*, February 2005, explores the connections between conservative foundation grantmaking and the politically influential evangelical movement. This latter report notes that 5 campus organizing groups, most notably Campus Crusade for Christ, spends \$700 million a year recruiting for evangelical Christianity.

provided by the IRD PR machine. Through these means, the IRD launches smear campaigns against their opponents. It also sponsors the publication of conservative theology.<sup>2</sup>

As the IRD was active, progressive religion became more fragmented. Most denominations moved their central offices from New York to small Midwest or southern cities to save money.<sup>3</sup> With declining membership numbers and funds, they reduced or eliminated campus ministry programs while the right grew theirs. Now, evangelizing for conservative Christianity on college campuses is funded at \$700 million a year.

Its focus during the Reagan years was anti-communism, but, in 1989, with collapse of the Berlin Wall, the IRD turned its crosshairs on feminists and gays and lesbians. They succeeded in having the top ranking Presbyterian woman in the U.S., Mary Ann Lundy, fired in 1994 for giving \$60,000 to a major, and very successful, feminist conference called “Reimagining.” On “Nightline” I trounced an IRD reporter who was slandering the conference and became a target of one of their smear campaigns. I researched their history and have been following the IRD since they began their attacks.

In 1989, they decided to harass the office of United Methodist Women (UMW), which raises and spends about \$20 million of its own funds to benefit women all over the world. The IRD formed the Methodist Good News/RENEW group to caricature the UMW as anti-American and radically feminist. The IRD sends anti-UMW propaganda to church members, under the guise of reform and spiritual renewal and tries to undermine its funding.

---

<sup>2</sup>An IRD watch site, with articles and links to extensive information is at: <http://www.mediatransparency.com/recipientprofile.php?recipientID=174> (accessed Dec. 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The IRD propagated the idea that the mainlines were dying because they had become too liberal and members disgusted with this liberal trend were abandoning their churches. In *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991, D. Newell Williams, a member of my denomination the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), demonstrated that the loss of mainline membership was from liberals who were leaving. Currently, the mainline Protestant proportion of membership related to the overall U.S. population is approximately what it was historically for a century, except for the years 1945-1980, when there was an exceptionally high percentage of mainline members.

The IRD has been as successful as it has because right wing funding is different from progressive funding. Progressives tend to give to direct services that improve people's lives, and they fund innovative new programs. The process of obtaining such grants is time-consuming and expensive, as is follow-up evaluation and reporting.

Right wing funding is different.<sup>4</sup>

1. Conservatives create and sustain long-term institutions, supporting general operating expenses with few strings attached, rather than programs. This kind of support allows institutions to be flexible, allowing rapid, nimble institutional responses to social change and politics.
2. Conservative funding is for the long term survival of institutions and is often maintained for two decades or more. The IRD has been around 24 years.
3. Funders invest in institutions that develop and market conservative values and policy ideas, i.e. in "think tanks," and support a wide range of institutions that advance a political policy agenda.

Their campaign, from Reagan to Gingrich to Bush, has used religion to organize conservative voters. While we may see Bush's current polls and the '06 elections as an opportunity for real change, you can bet the IRD and their allies see this as a temporary blip, just as they saw Clinton as a blip, because they know their funders will stick with them and fund them over the long haul.

I do not want to be misunderstood as saying we should stop funding direct services and new programs, but I think we need to take a look at how to support, for the long haul, the work

---

<sup>4</sup>The NCRP's *Not All Grants Are Created Equal: Why Nonprofits Need General Operating Expenses from Foundations*, September 2005, explores the debate on foundations providing project support versus operating support. Available for download Dec. 2005 at , <http://www.ncrp.org>. The progressive groups most disadvantaged by the differences in funding patterns are those that do political advocacy, which requires rapid response to changing circumstances, rather than the establishment of long-term programs and direct services.

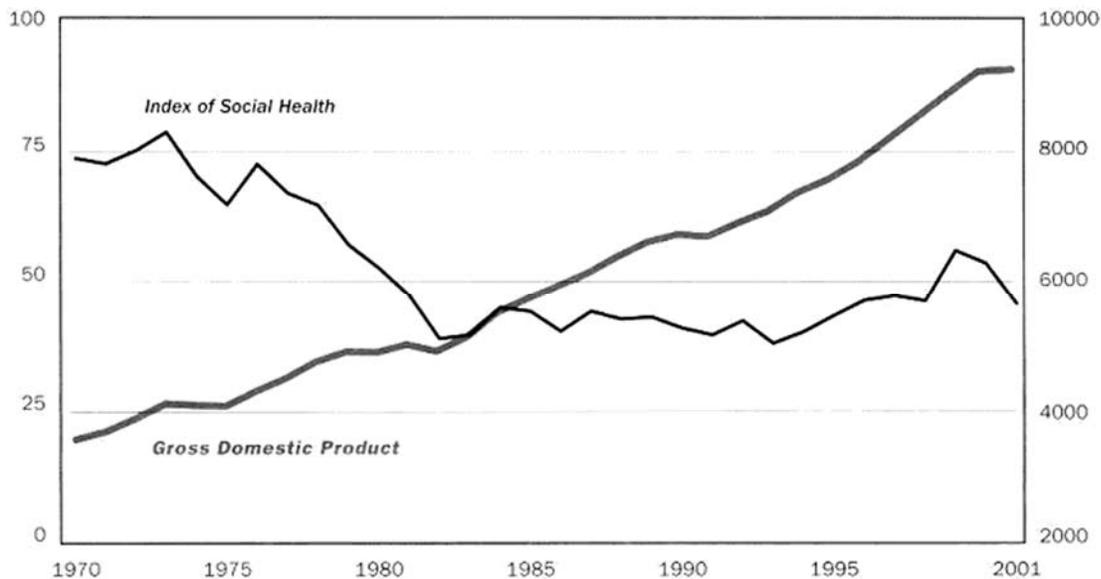
of feminists in religion who can provide the values reframing for social change. We must focus on ideology and policy wars and on impacting churches as well as providing direct services.

We have a good shot at winning the long-term struggle. Why? Because the IRD went after feminists too late. By 1989, a large body of feminist work in religion had been produced, and we were in our third generation of feminist religious scholarship. In the past twenty years, feminist work has been taught in seminaries, by both men and women, and a number of theological schools are now headed by feminists.<sup>5</sup> Others have near majorities of women faculty. These schools are think tanks for feminist and womanist work in religion. My church just elected the first woman to be President of a mainline Protestant denomination. To counter the religious right, secular feminists will find feminists of faith your best allies. We know the opposition well, have been doing this work for a very long time, and have successful women's organizations that have lasted for generations.

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, Starr King School in Berkeley, Chicago Theological Seminary, Hartford Seminary, and Drew University Theological School.

**Index of Social Health of the United States and Gross Domestic Product 1970-2001**



Source: Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy

Social Health Indicators:

- Child poverty
- Child abuse
- Teenage drug abuse
- Average weekly wages
- Health insurance coverage
- Out-of-pocket health costs among those aged 65 and over
- Food stamp coverage
- Access to affordable housing
- Income inequality
- Infant mortality
- High school dropouts
- Unemployment
- Poverty among those aged 65 and over
- Homicides
- Alcohol-related traffic fatalities.
- Teenage Suicide

Overall, since 1970, the GDP has grown by 158 percent, while social health has worsened by 38 percent. The chart below makes clear that the relationship between overall economic growth and social health has changed. In the early and mid-1970s, the GDP and the Index of Social Health showed similar patterns. In those years, economic growth was far more in concert with social health. In 1977, however, the curves began to diverge. As social health started on a significant decline, the GDP continued its upward trend. After a brief two-year interval in which the separation lessened, the gap has begun to grow again.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Miringoff, M. L., 2003, "2003 Index of Social Health: Monitoring the Social Well-Being of the Nation," Tarrytown, NY: Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy.