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Feminism and Christianity don't have to be mutually exclusive

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

As you may remember from the introductory post to this blog, I write about my life of "existing in many spaces at once, holding multiple identities and not quite serving as a model example of any of them." In the minds of some, perhaps many, it's impossible for two of my identities, Christian and feminist, to coexist. If religion -- and more specifically, a patriarchal religion like Christianity -- oppresses women, how can a feminist also be a Christian?

Although the Nuns on the Bus, films such as "Radical Grace" and books like *Jesus Feminist* have or are gaining some notoriety, in academia, the binary is so acute that little research exists on just how women manage to occupy both identities. For her master's thesis, Jessica B. Whitish, a recent graduate of the University of Louisville with a master's degree in women's and gender studies, conducted historical research on a woman who could be considered a model for how faith informs one's feminism: Sr. Lucy Freibert.

Born in Louisville, Ky., in 1922 and now living at her order's motherhouse, Freibert joined Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in 1945 and spent much of her adult life as a women's studies scholar and feminist activist. When her feminist views and political activism created friction between her and the administration of Spalding University -- then Spalding College and an institution her Catholic community owned -- Freibert left in 1971 to teach at the University of Louisville, a public, secular university. There, she continued to ruffle feathers by founding courses in women's studies and by maintaining a zero-tolerance policy for racism and sexism in her classroom and in her department. While she was, as she saw it, ministering through the transformative power of education, she didn't always introduce herself to students as a nun, and her known views on reproductive choice led lay members of Louisville's Catholic

community to question if she was one.

Whitish's history of Freibert's life ends in the 1970s, but it's packed with lessons for women, faith, feminism and the study of those topics today. Whitish completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Notre Dame in 2004 and met feminists there who were, she said, "very, very Catholic and still very, very feminist." She learned narratives of love, equality and justice in both feminism and Catholicism and found that "what's at core of each is very much in harmony."

Through her research on Freibert's life, which she conducted through archival research and oral histories with Freibert and some of her friends and colleagues, Whitish also found congruency between Catholicism and feminism specific to nuns living with other sisters. The vow of chastity allows women to stop defining themselves by their level of desirability for a man. And similar to lesbian separatists at the height of the women's liberation movement, sisters living together are able to separate themselves from an oppressive, patriarchal culture that doesn't allow them to be themselves. They are able instead to foster strength through sisterhood, similar to the liberation racial and gender minorities experience when they are able to create what are known as "safe spaces."

Such spaces, however, for women who embrace both a religious identity and a feminist one can be hard to come by. Even Freibert felt "alienated" from church, family and sisters, and Whitish personally has witnessed a lot of "code-switching" among feminists in academic circles who feel the need to hide their religious affiliation in front of professors who aren't afraid to say they find religion backward. Whitish believes shutting people down cuts off productive dialogue, and she noted that secular communities can be misogynist and sexist, too.

Whitish's work on Freibert suggests a call for further exploration of faith and feminism as another form of intersectionality. Within U.S. feminist history, "there's a tendency to gloss over whether women have any religious affiliation, but for years, [the church, house of worship, or religious order] was women's only institution," she said. Additionally, women's family and racial/ethnic traditions often are linked to religion. This means religion can be just as inseparable as race or class when considering sources of women's oppression or empowerment.

Despite the perceived irreconcilability of her beliefs, a "call to advocate for justice" led Freibert's faith and her feminism. The research on women like Freibert is sparse, but Whitish finds this topic interesting and may continue to write on it. There are "not a lot of people telling that story," Whitish said, "but it's super important."

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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