

reclaiming the f word: the new feminist movement

Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune (Zed Books, 2010)

It has become fashionable to say that 'feminism' is dead, or at least is past its sell-by date, or – as an academic discipline – has collapsed into a variety of 'feminisms'. So I was intrigued when I was asked to contribute to the research for this book, and then even more intrigued to read it. One of the authors, Kristin Aune, did her PhD on women in one of the new churches, and has written on Christians and singleness and more recently on why Christian women are leaving the Church.



The authors set out to reclaim feminism by arguing for what they call the 'new feminist movement'. They point out that, while much has been gained for women by earlier waves of feminism, women still feel unequal in a number of ways.

In their research, the authors received responses from nearly 1,300 women, and found widespread support for traditional 'feminist' issues such as equal pay, equal opportunities in education, shared housework and childcare, and welfare provision for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. They found that many women begin: 'I'm not a feminist but...' and that a surprisingly large percentage of women surveyed recently would consider themselves feminists: two-thirds of 16-1-25 year olds in one 2007 poll and nearly 40% of women in a 2008 poll. Thus, feminism is very much alive and well.

While those surveyed varied in their responses, there was consensus in seven main areas, the things today's feminists are most concerned about, and the seven chapters of this book focus on these: liberated bodies; sexual freedom and choice; an end to violence against women; equality at work and home; politics and religion transformed; popular culture free from sexism; feminism reclaimed.

While I might not have picked up the book had I not been asked for my views, I am glad I read it. I was surprised how strongly I felt about some of the issues explored, for example, the section on body image and the beauty industry in 'liberated bodies'. I'm all too aware that many young women have low self esteem and are offered impossibly slim models of what constitutes 'beauty'. Older women too worry about their size, shape and physical appearance. As the authors note, fashion offers women creativity, which is good, but women are all too often defined primarily by their appearance and not their ability or performance.

Each chapter covers a wide range of areas, and is full of facts and figures, surveys and quotations. I have written on domestic violence myself, so I was particularly interested in that chapter, and the one on politics and religion. It's been good to track progress on the violence issue over the last 30 years, but sexual violence and harassment are still huge issues, and global poverty and economic inequality can put women at greater risk. I've always argued that all Christians should be concerned about violence, and not leave it to feminists, but I'm not convinced that much progress has been made.

The discussion on religion makes the point that feminism often ignores or else attacks religion, and there is some evidence that second wave feminists are less religious. But this book takes a more nuanced approach, and examines a variety of approaches which feminists have taken to religion. I can remember debates back in the 1980s about whether one can be a feminist and a Christian (despite the fact that many of the nineteenth-century feminists were feminists *because* they were Christians!), and it's good to read that these debates continue.

I found the book illuminating and challenging in equal measure; a good insight into many aspects of women's lives which Christians all too often overlook. Also see www.thefword.org.uk.

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