

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: American Trends and American Fears: An
Analysis of the Women's Movement and the Religious Right
as Envisioned in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Date: 12/18/97

Comments (Optional):

*Excellent argument synthesizing
research in history, literature, women's
studies and religious studies.*

AMERICAN TRENDS AND AMERICAN FEARS:
An Analysis of the Women's Movement and the Religious Right as Envisioned in
Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

by Jennifer Hodson

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, The Handmaid's Tale, depicts a horrific society in the not so far future in which women are marginalized, dissent is not tolerated, and even speech is dangerous. A decadent present is polarized with a totalitarian future that prohibits all choice. Her novel can be classified at once as a work of science fiction, a satire, and a dystopia. All of these genres lend themselves well to social commentary and critique. Nevertheless, in creating her fictional society, the Republic of Gilead, Atwood is not trying to make a realistic political prediction. Rather, Atwood's novel is what Paul Brians refers to as "a kind of thought experiment which isolates certain social trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities" (1).

Specifically, Atwood examines debates within the feminist movement. Through examining several histories of the women's movement, it is evident that the movement had something of a triangular structure, made up of three basic factions of feminists (reform, liberationist, and socialist) that overlap somewhat in their activities and philosophies. Atwood's characters often suggest some of these factions and point to tensions within the movement. Furthermore, her novel examines the impact of the religious right on American society--its relationship to feminist backlash, its potential to effect legislation and political elections, its use of militaristic language, and the contradictions of its attitudes about gender. Many suspect Bill McCartney's Promise Keepers of being a "Third Wave" of the religious right, although PK leadership adamantly denies a political agenda. Hence, a case study of the Promise Keepers organization is helpful in analyzing the trends and conflicts which Atwood point to in her novel. Also, while Atwood criticizes the religious right, she does not entirely negate religion. One finds that Christian feminists can help to combat the sexism supposedly inherent in many aspects of their religion. Atwood's novel does not attempt to make accurate predictions about the future of the religious right. The function of The Handmaid's Tale, then, is to serve as a fictional, but cautionary tale.

In 1985, Margaret Atwood created a portrait of a society in the not-so-distant future in her best-selling novel, The Handmaid's Tale. In the Republic of Gilead, a fundamentalist theocracy which was formerly the United States, women are marginalized, dissent is not tolerated, even "speech is a dangerous act" (Hutcheon 31). The novel's thematics "operate by positing polarized extremes: a decadent present...and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice" (Malak 13). These competing polarities are exemplified in Aunt Lydia's statement that "There is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 1985, 33). The problem, however, lies in the fact that while the "present" may be "decadent," the future of Atwood's vision is absolutely oppressive. The "freedom from" of the future can only be considered freedom in the most limited sense. The women of this society are protected (on the surface) from degradation, rape, and sexual exploitation, yet they are prohibited from reading, can speak only in a narrow, prescribed way, and are restricted to specific domestic functions--a Wife, a Handmaid (Breeder), a Martha (Cook and House-cleaner), or an Econo-wife (a combination of the first three.) The only position of authority given to women is that of an Aunt, a woman who, with the aid of a cattle-prod, trains and dictates behavior and attitudes to the Handmaids.

Atwood's novel has been classified as a "twenty-first century fantasy" (Hutcheon 29) or as a work of science-fiction. Paul Briens of Washington State University notes that "Science-fiction need not involve technological innovation; it has been a long-standing principle that social change can provide the basis for science-fiction just as well as technological change" (1). Others, like Pat Aufderheide, refer to the novel as "a feminist nightmare." Aufderheide explains that Atwood's work "doesn't promise to be an exercise in political reality" (159). Instead, it is more accurately described as a "feminist nightmare" (Aufderheide 159), and extreme vision that spins out "the implications of religious fundamentalist claims for community over individual, of dogmatic morality over situation ethics, of a social order in which certain roles--especially gender roles--take

precedence over individual rights” (Aufderheide 159).

Most critics concede that The Handmaid’s Tale is a feminist text. They, however, tend to also place it within the fictional realm of satire, dystopia, or both. Lorraine York, in an essay entitled “Satire: The No-Woman’s Land of Literary Modes,” argues that Atwood’s very act of writing a satire is a challenge to gender conventions. Satire, she claims, is “a literary mode that is inevitably gendered male” (43). “The business of the satirist,” writes York, “is precisely to say nonnice things, and the pantheon of canonized satirists convened in one place would make for a nightmarish house party: Swift, Juvenal, Dryden, Smollett, Addison...” (43). York argues that all of the canonized satirists are marked by their gender and their “capacity for venom”(43). Since historical gender conventions dictate that women be proper and polite and not venomous, “any woman who writes satire runs afoul of one of the most sacred of female stereotypes: woman as a noncritical, private individual” (York 43). Atwood suggests that the book is intended as a satire by including a quote from Jonathan Swift among her epigraphs. Furthermore, in her contribution to Language in Her Eye, Atwood remarked that “any woman who began writing when I did, and managed to continue, did so by ignoring, as a writer, all her socialization about pleasing other people by being nice” (York 43).

Ruud Teeuwen uses The Handmaid’s Tale in the final weeks of a course he teaches on utopias at the University of Utrecht. In the beginning of the course, his students examine the genre of utopia, which Teeuwen refers to as “the genre of noble absolutism that provides a standard of behavior for each and all” (115). Utopias “deal in ideal societies” and “offer...to teach us the grammar of perfection” (Teeuwen 115). Dystopias, like The Handmaid’s Tale, by contrast “utterly distrust utopian proposals and never allow utopias to be the embodiment of ‘the principle of hope’” (Teeuwen 116). “Instead,” he continues, “dystopias make a particular utopia’s unfitness for human habitation palpable by a novelistic imagination of a human being’s life there” (Teeuwen 116). Atwood herself acknowledges her novel as a dystopia (Atwood 1995, 6) and undoubtedly succeeds at showing Gilead’s unfitness for human habitation (at least by women) through the

character of her female narrator. The problem with a utopian vision, one finds, is the people who do not freely elect to adopt the codes and ideals of the society and as a result are forced into compliance with its moral absolutism. “Better never means better for everyone,” reflects the protagonist of The Handmaid’s Tale. “It always means worse for some” (Atwood 1985, 274).

Atwood’s narrator, known only as Offred (a name which signifies her as the property of the commander Fred), is living a fairly normal life one day and only a few days later finds herself stripped of her job, her husband, daughter, possessions, rights, and identity. The Gileadan government takes all this away from her in the aim of creating a better society. As a result, “Offred” is forced to either live her life as walking womb, “a usable body... a boat with no cargo” (Atwood 1985, 211), or be sent to the colonies with the “Unwomen” to clean up dead bodies and toxic waste. She opts for the former, and as a result lives life as an isolated, introspective, lonely, and mechanical function of nature:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure,
or as a means of transportation, or an implement for the
accomplishment of my will... There were limits, but my
body was nevertheless, lithe, single, solid, one with me.
Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud
congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear
which is hard and more real than I am...Every month
there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen...
(Atwood 1985, 95).

Offred suffers extreme anomie. She is cut off from the world and from other people: “What you don’t know, won’t tempt you, Aunt Lydia used to say” (Atwood 1985, 252). She is disconnected from everything except her memories and her biological function. Though her mind swarms with words, she is restricted in what she can say to others. She has difficulty even looking at others, required to wear the nun-like “white wings” about her head. Any conversation outside the

carefully prescribed norm is dangerous and limited to cautious whispers. Offred confesses how she and Ofglen would “continue on our way, heading as usual for some open space we can cross, so we can talk. If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It’s more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech” (Atwood 1985, 260). She is also confined to strict behavioral codes, and even the smallest deviation can result in death. Atwood says,

The problem for my central character is that her knowledge is limited because she is not free to move around. When we combine this with controlled television and a controlled press, she has no way of finding out what’s really going on in the larger world. Sometimes I get cheerful young people saying, ‘Oh, why didn’t she just do X?’ And you point out that if she had just done X she probably would have been shot (Atwood 1995, 5-6).

Another point about dystopian narratives relates to their connection to actual social trends. Similar to Aufderheide’s assertion that The Handmaid’s Tale spun out of real social implications, others have said that Atwood’s novel “skates on the surface of reality” (Magill 141). Amin Malak, in an article connecting The Handmaid’s Tale to the dystopian tradition, compares Atwood to George Orwell “who in 1984 extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in twentieth-century politics” (12). He argues that Atwood “tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynistic theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity” (12). Atwood, of course, cautions that a novel cannot and should not be a political tract: “if the author’s main design is to convert us to something--whether that something be Christianity, capitalism, a belief in marriage as the only answer to a maiden’s prayer, or feminism--we are likely to sniff it out, and to rebel” (Atwood 1994, 2). Furthermore, she maintains that all her plots are “by and large fictional” (Atwood 1995, 5). Still, “they are the kind of thing that does happen, can happen, or might happen” (Atwood 1995, 5). Even if a novel is not a political tract, “‘politics’--in

the sense of human power structures--is inevitably one of their subjects" (Atwood 1994, 2). Paul Brians posits a definition of dystopias that provides insight into the possible connections between fiction and reality. "Dystopias," he writes, "are a kind of thought experiment which isolates certain social trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities" (Brians 1). They do not attempt to predict or forecast a realistic future. Neither do they try to reflect an actual present. Brians continues, "Ask yourself as you read [The Handmaid's Tale] not whether the events such as it depicts are likely to take place, but whether the attitudes and values it conveys are present in today's society" (1).

Many social trends, Brians claims, have contributed to Atwood's vision of Gilead. Most particularly, it is the product of issues and debates within the feminist movement in the 70s and early 80s. "Atwood has been very much a part of that movement," Brians explains, "but she has never been a mere mouthpiece for any group, always insisting on her individual perspectives" (1). Consistent with this assertion, Atwood presents her readers with various images of feminism. The narrator, her mother, and her friend Moira all hold somewhat different views on what feminism is. Hence, they point to different factions of the women's movement and to underlying tensions within the movement.

Through examining several histories of the women's movement, it is evident that the movement is not a solidified, cohesive whole. Though some feminists have preached a message of "sisterhood" and "a universal female experience," in reality all women have had not had identical experiences, and hence have developed very different philosophies. Still, much overlap does exist. One way, perhaps, of looking at the movement is as a triangular series of interlocking circles. On one level are the feminists who, though they differ in some critical ways, essentially see gender as the primary factor in oppression--the liberal, androgynous, radical, and cultural feminists. On another level, though still interlocking with the bigger triangle, are the feminists who recognize the role of gender in oppression but see other factors as also contributing to the dominant power structure, such as class or race.

Several writers have attempted to differentiate and describe the factions within the movement. All writers on the subject do not agree about the number of factions or how to distinguish them. Yet, the groups which they list all find a place within the overall triangular structure (see Appendix for diagram.)

Conover and Gray, in their analysis of social movements, divide the women's movement into two general sectors, reform (or women's rights) and radical (women's liberation). While they also mention socialist feminism, they fail to offer any discussion of its philosophies and simply group it with radical feminism as being revolutionary (Conover 52). The differences between reformist and radical movements, however, they describe at some length. One primary difference between the groups revolves around conceptions of the family. Reform feminists, which Conover and Gray associate most notably with Betty Friedan, "reacted against the 'momism' of the 1950s family and argued that roles other than housewife-mother must be allowed for women to be fulfilled" (Conover 53). In The Feminine Mystique, Friedan discusses how the image of the housewife-mother was promoted and perpetuated by educational and religious institutions and the popular media. She laments how, by the mid-1950s, somewhere near sixty percent of the women in college reported dropping out in order to get married (Friedan 15). Also during this time frame, the birth rate soared. Women were having children at a younger age and in greater numbers. All of the work of the turn of the century suffrage movement was ignored and taken for granted. Meanwhile, women were feeling generally dissatisfied and isolated (Friedan 32). Doctors in the 1950s began investigating a mysterious new illness, popularly dubbed "housewife fatigue," because cases were so frequent (Friedan 31). Friedan, writing in 1963, gives a name to this "Problem with No Name." She called it: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (Friedan 32).

Friedan sought something more. She did not intimate any desire, however, to negate family life altogether. She simply wanted additional roles to open up for women. Conover and Gray describe the position of Friedan and other reform feminists, writing, "The family should be

reformed, not abolished: after all, most of these women had husbands and children and lived in fairly traditional households” (53). Radical feminists, on the other hand, were those who “took more serious issue with the family” (Conover 53). According to the philosophy of these feminists, “women would never be free until the patriarchal family was abolished” (Conover 53). Men were identified as the enemy, and the major source of women’s oppression was their reproductive role (Conover 53). Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson, Conover and Gray feel, are typical of this group. Firestone stressed the centrality of marriage and the family to women’s oppression. In The Dialectic of Sex, she proposed that the family structure was “the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled” (Firestone, cited in Echols 148). Firestone believed that for women to achieve full liberation, traditional forms of family and marriage must be completely eradicated (Echols 148). Atkinson, likewise, with her group, “the Feminists,” perceived men, marriage, and reproduction as the sources of female oppression. Alice Echols writes that Atkinson “contended that if women wanted to change their situation they would have to ‘eradicate their own definition,’ would have to ‘commit suicide,’ would in effect have to stop acting like women” (171). Atkinson and the Feminists also placed blame on “the women themselves and the extent to which they collaborated in their oppression” (Echols 171), collaborating namely through their participation in marriage and child-rearing.

Conover and Gray also examine the different organizational structures of reformist and radical feminists. Within the reformist or women’s rights sector, what Conover and Gray refer to as a “top-down” organizational style was created. In top-down organizations, the leaders play a larger role in directing activities (Conover 16). When Betty Friedan joined with other reformist feminists to form the National Organization for Women, little time passed before “a federal structure emerged with local chapters collecting dues and sending a certain portion on to the national organization” (Conover 57). Other branches of the reformist movement, like the Women’s Equity Action League and the National Women’s Political Caucus, also adopted a federal-type structure. Women’s liberationists, however, organized themselves into “thousands of

small groups with few or no ties to one another” (Conover 57). This sector of the women’s movement rejected hierarchical structures and tried (as far as possible) to avoid electing leaders. Conover and Gray explain, “This is the structure one would expect, given their expressive goals, experience, and ideology” (57). While this structure is not very conducive to instrumental action, it is well suited “to personal change and growth” (Conover 57).

Gayle Graham Yates expands the number of factions within the movement to three: the Feminist Perspective, the Women’s Liberationist Perspective, and the Androgynous Perspective. Yates’s conception of what defines the feminist perspective essentially parallels Conover and Gray’s idea of the reformist or women’s rights feminist. Friedan, NOW, the Women’s Equity Action League, and the National Women’s Political Caucus, she argues, all adopt this perspective. Within the ideology of the feminist perspective, “Democratic government, the law and judicial system, the nuclear family, the public school, the vocational order--all male-derived ideas and institutions--are not challenged” (Yates 35). The goal of this group, hence, is “full and equal participation of women in the existing structures of society” (Yates 36). Yates quotes extensively from The Feminine Mystique and outlines the histories of NOW and other feminist perspective organizations.

Yates, however, does not contrast the reform, or feminist perspective, feminists only with the more radical or liberationist faction. She also distinguishes a third category, the feminists who adopt what she calls an androgynous perspective. To the liberationists she attributes the ideology of “women over against men” (77) and to the androgynous perspective “women and men equal to each to other” (117). Of the former, Yates writes, “it celebrates women and affirms whatever women feel and do,” and at the same time “it is anti-masculinist, against all things male-derived and sometimes against males themselves” (77). The primary focus of change for this group is social (unlike the feminist perspective group which focused more directly on legal battles.) Proponents see social institutions like the family “not only as the microcosm of the patriarchy that is society, but also [as] the primary social unit that fosters and carries out patriarchy” (Yates 81).

Hence, one is not surprised to find that Yates places both Firestone and Atkinson in this category.

The new perspective that Yates offers, nevertheless, is the androgynous one. According to this point of view, “men should be equal to women as well as women equal to men” (Yates 117). Its primary goal is for women and men to work together to challenge and reform existing institutions. “Implied in it is a belief that both women and men can change once they see the inherent contradiction in a society that affirms human freedom yet circumscribes the roles to be played in it by males and females,” Yates explains (117). Furthermore, the androgynous perspective “assumes that rigidity in the male role expectation is as dehumanizing for the male as the rigidity in female roles is for the female” (Yates 117). Yates classifies many of the views of Gloria Steinem, a driving force behind the feminist magazine Ms., and Alice Rossi, a family sociologist, professor, researcher, and former chairperson of the Women’s Caucus of the American Sociological Association, as belonging to the androgynous sector of the women’s movement.

Steinem sought equal economic opportunities for both men and women (Yates 127). She, like Friedan, wanted to see women holding half the country’s political offices (Yates 128). She also felt that a woman should be allowed to opt for a career as a housewife, but that as such a woman “would function vocationally as her husband’s housekeeper and hostess” and “would receive a legally determined percentage of his pay” (Yates 128). Otherwise, child care and homemaking should be shared by men and women equally. Similarly, Rossi supported absolute equality of the sexes. She once wrote that “tenderness and expressiveness should be cultivated in boys and socially approved in men” and that “workmanship and constructive aggression should be cultivated in girls and approved in women” (Yates 130). Rossi called for the restructuring of child care in American society (Yates 130), a shift from the pattern of residence from suburban to urban in order to minimize the isolation of men from the home and women from the workplace (Yates 131), and a change in the educational pattern of boys and girls “so that sex stereotypes for occupations and activities are no longer inculcated” (Yates 131). Other feminists of this

perspective advocated adoption of more gender-neutral language (Yates 133). In summation, Yates writes

While the feminist paradigm would indicate female participation in male-originated, already existing institutions, and the women's liberationist paradigm would call for new female-initiated institutions, the androgynous paradigm points to a new form of social order in which both women and men are involved in the inception and construction (123).

Alice Echols, in her examination of radical feminism from 1967 to 1975, defines radical feminism in terms somewhat similar to those used by Conover and Gray and to Yates's description of the women's liberationist perspective. Echols, however, differs from Yates by not seeing radical feminism as a purely social phenomenon. "Radical feminists," Echols explains, "argued that women constituted a sex-class, that relations between women and men needed to be recast into political terms" (3). True, the radical feminists, as Echols points out, arose from the larger radical movement of the 1960s, from groups like Students for a Democratic Society, which exhibited "indifference toward traditional political activity, especially electoral politics" (Echols 25). Yet these groups still had political motivations. They were just "less interested in repairing society than in developing new forms that would prefigure the desired society" (Echols 25). Radical women began splitting away from the larger movement, however, because in its plans for "the desired society," it did not account for the inequality of the sexes. Nevertheless, the tactics which the radical feminists chose to employ in their activism often sprung directly from their roots within groups like Students for a Democratic Society. Given their aversion to traditional politics, Yates's assumptions are correct in that these women lacked the lobbying power of NOW or the Women's Equity Action League. In fact, in 1969, radical activist Barbara Mehrof was even willing to "give back the vote" won by the women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, feeling that "voting was a 'mockery of democracy' and equality in a fundamentally

unequal society an obscenity” (Echols 12). Shulamith Firestone reportedly offended and angered the famous suffragist and founder of the National Women’s Party, Alice Paul, by asking her to join the protestors on stage in burning their voter registration cards. Though burning voter registration cards on the surface seems like a rejection of politics by radical women, in actuality, “The purpose of their protest was to declare that suffragism, which they [the radical feminists] claimed had vitiated the earlier wave of feminism, was dead and that a new movement for genuine liberation was underway” (Echols 12).

Yates saw this liberationist faction of the women’s movement as being primarily concerned with changing social roles and stereotypes (Yates 77). While one reading Echols could still argue that this is true, Echols maintains that “personal” issues like gender roles are “political” in the minds of radical feminists. The idea that “personal is political” originated, Echols claims, with “the new left” of the broader “Movement” of the 1960s; yet the women’s liberationists popularized it (Echols 16). Central to the notion that “the personal is political” is a desire to reintegrate the personal and political spheres. Furthermore, embedded within this idea is its converse--“the political is personal.” Echols explains, “It was not enough to sign leaflets or participate in marches; the point was to change one’s life, to transform oneself through radical action” (17).

Echols also, unlike Yates, does not classify radical feminism as a wholly unified and homogeneous movement. Within the ranks of the radical women existed numerous debates and ideas about the sources of oppression. For example, some radical groups like the Redstockings (founded by Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone in February 1969) took what they definably called a “pro-woman” stance. “According to the pro-woman line,” Echols writes, “women’s behavior was the result of immediate external conditions and not, as many other feminists argued, the result of their conditioning” (144). In fact, the Redstocking Manifesto stated that “women’s submission is not the result of brainwashing, stupidity, or mental illness but of continual, daily pressure from men” (cited in Echols 144). Other groups, however, like Cell 16 (formed by Roxanne Dunbar in the summer of 1968) specifically attributed women’s behavior to their “sex-

role conditioning” (Echols 160). “For Cell 16,” Echols demonstrates, “the problem was women’s diffidence and their dependence upon men, and the solution lay in women ‘unconditioning’ themselves by taking off the accumulated emotional and physical flab that kept them enthralled to men” (160).

Beyond the (often divided) radical feminists, Echols also recognizes what she calls “liberal feminists.” These feminists are essentially the same ones which Conover and Gray refer to as “reformists” and Yates designates as prescribing to “the feminist perspective.” Similar in rhetoric to these other writers, Echols says that “Whereas liberal feminism sought to include women in the mainstream, radical feminism embodied a rejection of the mainstream itself” (15). Additionally, “while liberal feminists defined the problem as women’s exclusion from the public sphere, radical feminists focused on the sexual politics of personal life” (Echols 15). The focus that separated the radical feminists from the liberal, Friedan-esque feminists, therefore, was the radicals’ refusal to work within existing institutions. Rather, radicals sought to establish new institutions.

Another faction of feminism, according to Echols, sprung from the radical feminists’ goal of creating new institutions--cultural feminism. “But while cultural feminism did evolve from radical feminism,” Echols reminds her readers, “it nonetheless deviated from it in some crucial respects” (6). Echols perceives radical feminism as being fundamentally a political movement and cultural feminism as a countercultural movement. Radicals were “dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system” (Echols 6). Cultural feminists, on the other hand, were “aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female” (Echols 6). “In the terminology of today,” Echols continues, “radical feminists were typically social constructionists who wanted to render gender irrelevant, while cultural feminists were generally essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness” (6). Yates defined women’s liberation as a movement that both “celebrates the female” and is “against things male-derived” (Yates 77). Echols, however, makes a distinction here. In fact, her explanation of radical feminists as wanting “to render gender irrelevant” (Echols 6) sounds more similar to Yates’ androgynous perspective than liberationist perspective. Hence,

one can assume that Yates did not recognize cultural feminism as a separate movement, even though great differences between cultural and radical feminism were manifest. Echols notes that cultural feminism “was assailed by radical and left feminists alike” (243). She quotes Ann Fury’s warning against “retreating into a female culture” found in the December 1970 issue of

Everywoman:

When we retreat into our culture we cover our political tracks with moralism. We say our culture is somehow ‘better’ than male culture. And we trace this supposed superiority to our innate nature, for if we attributed it to our powerlessness, we would have to agree to its dissolution the moment we seize control... When we obtain power, we will take on the characteristics of the powerful (cited in Echols 243).

While cultural feminism and radical feminism undeniably intersected one another, they were definitely separate entities. For radicals, the idea of opposing male and female natures was sexist. For cultural feminists, however, gender differences “reflected deep truths about the intractability of maleness and femaleness” (Echols 9). Echols suggests that by claiming “that women are more nurturant, less belligerent, and less sexually driven than men, cultural feminists have simply revalued dominant cultural assumptions about women” (9).

Echols mentions a fourth category of feminism--socialist feminism. The socialist sector of the women’s movement was unique in that it believed a socialist revolution would bring about the liberation of women (Echols 3). Socialist feminists have also used Marxist theory to examine conflicts within the family, such as Heidi I. Hartmann does in her analysis of the distribution of housework. Hartmann acknowledges the pervasive powers of patriarchy, yet she also takes economic concerns into account: “In a Marxist feminist view, the organization of production both within and outside the family is shaped by patriarchy and capitalism... These underlying patriarchal and capitalist relations among people, rather than familial relations themselves, are the sources of

dynamism in our society” (342). Socialist feminists maintain that “gender oppression cannot be analyzed alone, as though it were unaffected by other systems of oppression” (Echols 293). Issues of class, production, and the distribution of wealth and labor also needed recognition. While radical feminists did not altogether oppose this notion, they did not see capitalism as the main source of women’s oppression: “gender rather than class was the primary contradiction” (Echols 3). Socialist feminists, like cultural feminists, “incorporated elements of radical feminism into their analysis” (Echols 4). Nevertheless, also like the cultural feminists, they remain, in Echols’ analysis, a separate, distinct faction.

Reformist feminism arose as a reaction to the “feminine mystique” of the 1950s. Radical and socialist feminism sprung from the larger civil rights, student protest, and anti-Vietnam movement of the 1960s. All of these groups have survived in some form or another up into the present. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, a new group of feminists became more vocal--feminists from African-American or other minority communities. Despite the connections between the women’s movement and the movement for civil rights, ironically, white reformist and radical feminists frequently dismissed female voices from different ethnic groups as “too different” or “too difficult to understand” (Lorde 117). Also, the uniqueness of the African-American or Third World woman’s prerogative was seen as a challenge to the idea held by many of a universal female experience.

Echols states that in the 1980s, “growing numbers of women of color [became] involved in the women’s movement and have challenged the movement’s silencing of women’s differences” (291). As a result of the involvement of more minority women within the movement, feminists theorists, in the period from 1978 to 1984, “made visible aspects of women’s oppression that were previously obscured and have refined the conceptual apparatus needed for a more adequate understanding of women’s situations” (Jaggar xii). Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist, charges that “By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age” (116).

Such differences must be acknowledged, she asserts, if the women's movement is to make any more real gains: "Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences present the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" (117).

Where do the narrator of The Handmaid's Tale, her mother, and Moira fit in these classifications? Apparently, just as Atwood belongs to no specific group and maintains her own individual approach to feminism, so do her characters. Nevertheless, they do exhibit some characteristics of the various feminist groups and illuminate several dilemmas within the movement. First of all, one must note that the narrator's mother is a product of the women's movement of the 1970s. Her daughter, like Moira, belongs to the next generation, coming after the initial heat of the women's movement has somewhat subsided. When the narrator is still under the supervision of the Aunts in the old high school building, she sees a film, "what Aunt Lydia would call an Unwoman documentary" (Atwood 1985, 152). In this film, she sees her mother: "She's wearing the kind of outfit Aunt Lydia told us was typical of Unwomen in those days, overall jeans with a green and mauve plaid shirt underneath and sneakers on her feet; the sort of thing Moira once wore, the sort of thing I can remember wearing long ago, myself" (Atwood 1985, 153). Her mother is involved in a protest where the women are carrying signs that say "Take Back the Night," "Freedom to Choose," "Recapture Our Bodies," and "Do You Believe a Woman's Place is on the Kitchen Table?" Of course, the women in Gilead are not supposed to read. Someone has evidently forgotten to blacken out the words in this video. Yet, these words are central in revealing the mother's involvement in the female-orchestrated protests of the time before.

The narrator's mother surrounded herself with circles of female friends and participated frequently in marches and protests. Sometimes the protests became violent. "They'd been in a march that day," Offred recalls. "My mother had a bruise on her face and a little blood" (Atwood 1985, 233). Issues of Ms. Magazine were frequently found lying around "my mother's various apartments while I was growing up" (Atwood 1985, 238). Furthermore, the narrator's mother is

known for making such comments as “I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for tens seconds worth of half babies” and “A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (Atwood 1985, 155). As such, this character does not seem to be very closely aligned with the Friedan-type feminists who worked within the system of existing institutions (whether legislative or family institutions.) She participates in radical protests, and yet she shrinks away from men, much as the cultural feminists did. She also reads Ms., a magazine embraced by liberal feminists but often attacked by radical feminists. Many radical feminists read Ms., yet many also criticized the magazine for employing writers from outside the movement (Echols 266), and some even “insinuated that Ms. Magazine was part of a CIA strategy to replace radical feminism with liberal feminism” (Echols 266). Still, “Ms. Magazine, which began publishing in 1972, was quite successful in promulgating this ‘pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps’ brand of feminism and many women came to embrace it” (Echols 199). Gloria Steinem, the editor of Ms., often “deployed radical rhetoric, but like Friedan implied that women’s liberation was men’s liberation as well” (Echols 199). Hence, the character of the mother has ties to not only to radical and cultural feminism, but some (albeit loose ones) to liberal and what Yates would call “androgynous” feminism as well.

Given these facts, two conclusions are possible. First, Atwood may be using the character of the mother as a general representative of the women’s movement, most factions included. Second, Atwood uses the mother to point to the underlying tensions and contradictions within the movement. Both of these statements, in fact, seem plausible.

It is also interesting to note the different attitudes which the narrator and Moira take towards the mother character. The narrator frequently resented her mother when she was younger: “I must have been fourteen, fifteen, that age when daughters are most embarrassed by their mothers” (Atwood 1985, 233). Yet, while she attributed most of her disapproval to routine mother-daughter antagonism, she also “wanted from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment” (Atwood 1985, 234). As the narrator got older, her attitude towards her mother was

more benign, more comical: “She liked to come over to my house and have a drink while Luke and I were fixing dinner and tell us what was wrong with her life, which always turned into what was wrong with ours” (Atwood 1985, 155). Essentially, the narrator’s brand of feminism is much more subtle and much less vocal than her mother’s. Echols reports how many “postfeminist” young women of the 1980s were “indifferent if not hostile to the women’s movement” (293). Feminism, she argues, was “To some extent...the victim of its own success” (Echols 293). The accomplishments of the feminists of the 60s and early 70s had rendered the movement, to many women of the next generation, “irrelevant” (Echols 293) or even “anachronistic” (Echols 294). One could arguably situate the narrator somewhere among these postfeminist philosophies.

The differences between the narrator and her mother are quite obvious. Significantly, their attitudes towards the relationship between women and men are at odds. The narrator likes men. She dated a married man, Luke, and then married him herself after her divorce. Within the pro-woman line of radical feminism, this represents a problem issue. Could a woman still be pro-woman and attached to men? Could a woman be pro-woman and still have heterosexual desire? Could a pro-woman feminist get married? The narrator, obviously, would answer all these questions with “yes.” Her mother, on the other hand, might tend to disagree.

Though married, the narrator also sought employment outside the home. Her interests as a woman lie within already existing structures. In this sense, she resembles many of the liberal or reformist feminists. Furthermore, in her marriage, Luke did most of the cooking:

Cooking’s my hobby, Luke would say. I enjoy it.

Hobby, schmobby, my mother would say. You don’t
have to make to excuses to me. Once upon a time you
wouldn’t have been allowed to have such a hobby,
they’d have called you queer (Atwood 1985, 156).

The narrator finds a balance of power and responsibility in her relationship with Luke, much like the women of Yates’s androgynous perspective. Her mother, on the other hand, completely

rejects the importance of men, an idea more closely aligned to the radical or cultural factions of Echols' description.

Moirra, however, embraces her friend's mother as figure to be admired: "You're mother's neat, Moirra would say, when we were at college. Later: she's got pizzazz. Later still: she's cute. She's not cute, I would say. She's my mother" (Atwood 1985, 329). In many ways, Moirra is like the cultural feminists, seeking to retreat into a culture of women. In fact, the narrator criticizes her on this point: "I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moirra thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them" (Atwood 1985, 223). Ignoring men, however, is what Moirra strives to do. Moirra is a lesbian.

Moirra's sexual orientation points to another heated debate within the women's movement. In the late 60s and early 70s, Echols points out, "Reformist feminists were unalterably opposed to any discussion of lesbianism" (212). Furthermore, Echols continues, "Friedan reacted defensively to the early stirrings of lesbianism, labeling it a 'lavender menace,' and warning that it could undermine the credibility of the women's movement" (212). Others, however, were divided on the issue. While Moirra's desire to "retreat into a female culture" sounds remarkably similar to the philosophy of the cultural feminists, "lesbian-feminism was an affront to the cultural feminist idea of a universal female experience" (Echols 241). Many radical feminists, Echols attests, were beginning to openly experiment with lesbianism as early as 1968 (212). They perceived it as a break from the confines of heterosexual relationships (Echols 218). Moirra herself ventures that "it was different, because the balance of power was equal between women so sex was an even-steven transaction" (Atwood 1985, 222). Still, the introduction of issues of female sexuality "troubled many heterosexual feminists who had found in the women's movement a welcome respite from sexuality" (Echols 217). "Thus," Echols notes, "Roxanne Dunbar of Cell 16 argued that the task of feminism was to get women out of bed rather than changing the gender of their partners" (211). By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the movement was somewhat more accepting of

differences of sexual orientation. This is in large part due to the efforts of writers and theorists such as Audre Lorde, who brought the issues of oppression which were actually manifest in the women's movement to light.

Beyond the debates over sexuality and gender roles, women were also divided over the issue of pornography. Roxanne Dunbar "maintained that pornography is violence against women, and likened pornography to the lynching of blacks" (Echols 165). Echols labels Dunbar's statements as "probably the earliest feminist critique of pornography" (165). Other feminists, like Ti-Grace Atkinson in her speech on "Individual Responsibility and Human Oppression," also offered early critiques of pornography. It was not until the late 1970s, however, that pornography became central to a feminist analysis of male dominance (Echols 289). At the same time, nonetheless, many feminists criticized the anti-pornography movement for hindering freedom of speech and exaggerating the differences between males and females (Echols 363). Furthermore, Echols contends that it is not coincidental that the anti-pornography movement reached its peak in a time of intense backlash against feminism (289). In fact, as Paul Brians points out, "The sub-theme of this tangled debate which seems to have particularly alarmed Atwood is the tendency of some feminist anti-porn groups to ally themselves with religious anti-porn zealots who oppose the feminists on almost every other issue" (2).

The narrator's mother is staunchly anti-pornography, as one sees in the scene where she takes her daughter to the park on a day when women are rallying there to burn pornographic books and magazines (Atwood 1985, 50-51). Later, when the fundamentalists have taken over the country, one of the first changes was the closing of "the Pornomarts" (225). The woman behind the store counter (who has not yet been stripped of her job) is pleased by this action. She remarks to the narrator, "It's high time they did something" (226). The lines between feminist and fundamentalist rhetoric about pornography are even further blurred when Aunt Lydia takes up the issue. She would show the women under her command old pornographic films from the 1970s or 80s: "Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was

what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation” (152). Aunt Lydia often embraces feminist rhetoric to further a point. She even admits that some of the ideas of the “Unwomen,” aka feminists, “were sound enough...We would have to condone some of their ideas even today. Only some, mind you... But they were Godless, and that can make all the difference, don’t you agree” (152-53).

Aunt Lydia’s rhetoric was primarily one which appeared to support women. Offred recalls how Aunt Lydia showed them a film “made in a olden-days hospital” (146) of a woman giving birth. The film demonstrated how unnatural this type of birth could be. Speaking of the male doctors, Aunt Lydia remarked, “It used to be different, they used to be in charge” (146). In Gilead, women are in charge; but, based on the precedent of the Biblical “curse of Eve,” there are no more anesthetics. Later in the novel, Aunt Lydia again employs feminist rhetoric to defend the basic societal positions of women in Gilead: “There can be bonds of real affection....under such conditions. Women united for a common end!Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? ...Your daughters will have greater freedom” (209-10). Despite Aunt Lydia’s assertions, the Republic of Gilead actually robs women of freedom. As Brians points out, “The language of ‘protection of women’ could slip from a demand for more freedom into a retreat from freedom, to a kind of neo-Victorianism” (2). Hence, one finds Offred rebelling against both her mother and Aunt Lydia by finding pleasure from something that both of them would have ridiculed as degrading to women. She puts on the outfit of feathers and sequins presented to her by the Commander. Offred thinks to herself, “there’s an enticement in it, it carries the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free” (Atwood 1985, 299). “Freedom,” Offred concludes, “like everything else, is relative” (299). She finds a rebellious pleasure in the outfit, yet ultimately she has no choice about wearing it.

While the novel does not take a definite stand on the issue of pornography, one can argue that it does condemn pornography as generally degrading. Pornographic depictions of women are

just one more aspect of the “decadent” present which Malak highlights (Malak 13). For a reader overwhelmed with the horrors of Gilead, it is easy to forget the horrors existing before, the atrocities women experienced before the revolution. Atwood makes these clear by showing how fragile life and freedom are even in pre-Gileadan America:

Is that how we lived, then?...We lived as usual by ignoring.
 Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at
 it...There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses
 in ditches or in the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated...
 But they were about other women, and the men who did
 such things were other men...We were the people who were
 not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the
 edge of print. It gave us more freedom (Atwood 1985, 74).

Freedom, in pre-Gileadan society, is a delicate balance of ignoring and survival. Nevertheless, Gilead does not meet its promise of “protecting women” and giving them “freedom from” violence and degradation. To emphasize this point, Atwood describes the sickening terror of the Women’s Salvaging. At the Salvaging, Offred herself touches the rope, “in time with the others” (355), which is implicit in the death of three women. After touching the rope for the first time, she recalls how she then placed her hand on her heart “to show my unity with the salvagers and my consent, my complicity in the death of this woman” (355). Atwood’s subsequent description of the bodies (355-56) is rather graphic, signifying the violence and horror of the deed. Whether an Angel (male) or Aunt (female) actually kicked away the stool, Atwood does not say. Nevertheless, though the women “give” their consent and participate in the death of other women, the whole situation is orchestrated by the men of Gilead and orchestrated according to men’s laws. Underlying Offred’s surface-level complicity is a sense of the fact that she has no choice. Violence still occurs in Gilead. In Gilead, however, men are able to pass the blame over to the women in most cases and to cite “divine sanctions” in all cases. Also in Gilead, the degradation and sexual

exploitation of women continues in forms beyond just the use of the handmaids. The men of Gilead, despite their moralistic, God-fearing language, have instituted a private club known secretly as “Jezebel’s.” This allows Atwood to further her critique of fundamentalists as not only sexist but hypocritical as well.

The period of the late 1970s and early 1980s was one of intense backlash against feminism. Brians explains that “The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, the rise of the religious right, the election of Ronald Reagan, and many sorts of backlash (mostly hugely misinformed) against the women’s movement led writers like Atwood to fear that the antifeminist tide would not only prevent further gains for women, but turn back the clock” (2). While the fundamentalist right of the 1980s probably did not wish to turn the clock back much further than the conservative era of the “feminine mystique,” the 1950s, in Gilead, the clock is turned back much earlier to create a synthesis of two eras in which gender roles were especially rigid--the Puritan period of the seventeenth century and the Victorian age of the nineteenth century.

In a talk which Margaret Atwood gave at the May 1995 gathering of the Toronto Council of Teachers of English, she reminds her audience that The Handmaid’s Tale is set in Massachusetts. She also asks them to “recall that the United States began, at least that part of it, not with the eighteenth but the seventeenth century, and with what was essentially a theocracy” (Atwood 1995, 6). She notes how the Puritans were known to hang Quakers and “were not interested in dissent” (6). Furthermore, while William Penn and others came to the colonies in search of religious freedom and tolerance, Atwood points out that such was not the case with the Puritans. Rosemary Skinner Keller would agree with the first part of this assertion, yet she argues that “The struggle for religious freedom was at the heart of the relationship between church renewal and the place of women in early Puritan society of seventeenth century New England” (1548). The Puritan concept of religious freedom was not, however, an idea of tolerance. Instead, the Puritans sought their own freedom from the established Anglican church (Keller 1548).

Before coming to the colonies, within an atmosphere of incipient civil war in England,

“women often took the initiative to gather dissenting congregations, call ministers, and assert their own rights to preach and to administer churches” (Keller 1548). Such activities, Keller continues, were encouraged “when the foe was the established church” (1548). Yet when the dissenting clergy established churches according to New England laws, “their view of religious liberty changed sharply” (Keller 1548). While Puritan divine John Winthrop was on the ship en-route to America, he declared that “the emigrants were to enjoy the liberties of the Gospel within a harmonious community” (Keller 1548). Keller here clarifies that “liberty” did not signify any freedom of conscience in religious belief. Instead, it referred to the “freedom to obey the will of God and restore God’s order in a chaotic world” (Keller 1548). Atwood recalls the rich historical use of such “city upon a hill”-type rhetoric in the United States and applies it to the modern world:

if you were an American and your country was in a state of chaos and you wanted to take it over, you would probably say you were doing God’s will. What you would not say is, ‘Hi, my name’s Bob, I’m a liberal-democrat kind of person so vote for me.’ You might get the votes, but you wouldn’t get the tyranny, because it would be such a contradiction in terms (Atwood 1995, 6).

A vision like Winthrop’s, Keller maintains, “depended upon a highly structured hierarchical society in which all people knew their places and chose to stay in them” (1548). Moreover, Keller continues, “Accommodation of women to their socially prescribed subordination was essential to the maintenance of the Puritan order, and most females assumed that position without question” (1548). Note that the ideal is for “all” to accept their position, while in reality only “most” did. Some exceptions existed. These, however, were few and short-lived. “Throughout the seventeenth century,” Keller writes, “women who dissented from the authority of minister, magistrate, or husband were branded heretics and often deemed witches as well” (1549). The ultimate fate of dissenters, however, was almost always that of Anne Hutchinson and Mary

Dyer. Hutchinson died while exiled from Massachusetts on account of her assertiveness and beliefs. Dyer, a close friend of Hutchinson and also a vocal woman, was executed in 1660 (Marsden 22). Religious historian George Marsden echoes Atwood's assertions about the Puritans when he writes, "Contrary to some once-popular mythology, religious liberty was not yet a principle, other than for themselves, in which American Puritans yet had an interest" (22).

Brians warns against "the language of protection" employed by Gileadan authorities as potentially promoting a "retreat...to a kind of neo-Victorianism" (2). Aware of the strict gender conventions of the nineteenth century Victorian era, it is not very surprising that Atwood depicts the Commander's house as "Late Victorian" (Atwood 1985, 11). She even goes so far as to use language indicative of gender roles to describe the house. The *grandfather* clock in the hallway is an authoritarian figure which "doles out time" (11). The passive and procreative female roles, meanwhile, are represented by "the *motherly* front *sitting* room, with its *flesh* tones and hints" (11).

In Victorian society, white, middle class women's roles were strictly confined to those of mother, wife, and homemaker. Men established their masculine identity through "manly" labor, images of themselves as "warriors" and "hunters," and their role as the head of the patriarchal family (DeBerg 15). Yet, with the coming of increased industrialization and urbanization in the late nineteenth century, men were frequently led further away from the home in their employment. As a result, economic activities were "becoming exclusively male domains" (Marsden 83). "The economic aspects of a man's life," Marsden states, "were also becoming increasingly rationalized; that is, they were being conducted more on the scientific-technological assumption that tended to lessen the importance of personal relations and increase emphases on the impersonal considerations of efficiency and maximizing profits" (84). At the same time, Marsden continues, "women were carving out a spiritual domain in church and developing power domestically, which provided them with meaning, vocation, and a sense of moral superiority to those who held formal power in society" (84). In other words, the male sphere of public, rational, and economic life was

becoming increasingly divided from the female sphere, which now included not only the home and family, but religious life as well. Yet, despite women's gains in the realm of spirituality and religion, "this happened at a time when religion was having a decreased influence on the affairs of the world" (Roberts 318).

Keith A. Roberts refers to this period of the late nineteenth century as the "feminization of Christianity" (318). Barbara Welter calls it the "feminization of American religion" (DeBerg 21). Although women had for several centuries been viewed "as spiritually more vulnerable than men and as a source of evil influence" (Roberts 318), in the late nineteenth century they were celebrated as part of the "cult of domesticity" (Marsden 83). "As mothers," Marsden explains, "women were to train their sons in more Christian virtues, and as wives they were to save their husbands from their selfish passions and vices" (83). In essence, "By making the family strong, women were considered the backbone of society" (Marsden 83). Betty DeBerg does not describe these new female responsibilities in such positive terms as Marsden, however. "Although every society needs systems of order and stability," she writes, "nineteenth century America chose to place the primary burden of such order and stability on women, on their moral restraint and their confinement within the domestic realm" (DeBerg 24). DeBerg, on the other hand, also asserts, "With the male heads of the family occupied all day in the factories, a division of labor, found in traditional households but amplified in industrial society, arose between husband and wife" (16). As a result of the man's absence from the domestic sphere, the wife gained "more responsibility and power within the household" (DeBerg 16), and "the preserve of patriarchalism" was weakened (DeBerg 16).

Not only did the spiritual significance and responsibility of women increase during the "feminization" of religion, but the very language of Christianity--specifically the imagery of Jesus Christ--became what many would deem "more feminized" (Roberts 318). Roberts points out that during the 1700s, Jesus "had been viewed as a stern taskmaster and as the exalted ruler of God's kingdom" (318). In the 1800s, however, "the major characteristics attributed to Christ were loving

self-sacrifice, tender-heartedness, and willingness to forgive those who injured him” (Roberts 318). “Given the mixed signals that men were receiving about masculine and Christian virtues,” Roberts concludes, “it is not surprising that male church attendance dropped off and religion came to be viewed as a woman’s concern” (318).

Industrialization and urbanization greatly influenced these changes. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernism, in fact, are usually identified as the causes of the fundamentalist movement (DeBerg 7). DeBerg recognizes the significant impact of these factors, yet she feels that insufficient attention has been given to the influence of changing gender roles and conventions on the rise of fundamentalism (vii). Hence, DeBerg offers a unique view of the changes occurring in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America—one that is especially useful in examining Atwood’s historical framework.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were beginning to get professional educations, founding social and political reform organizations, marching for suffrage, and seeking divorces “at a rate that alarmed those who paid attention to such things” (DeBerg vii). Meanwhile, the authority of men rested on ever shakier ground (DeBerg 17). According to DeBerg, “Defense of an embattled gender ideology was an important component of the fundamentalist agenda. Fundamentalists used powerful religious symbols and sanctions to legitimize Victorian gender conventions and to attack women’s departures from them” (43).

The language of gender conventions, in fact, permeated the larger theological issues which defined the movement. Whether fundamentalists were preaching about dispensational premillennialism, biblical inerrancy, evolution, or modernism, DeBerg shows how the language at some point always comes back to concerns about the changing gender roles. Dispensational premillennialism, for example, was a theological point of view which “divided history into several distinct stages” (DeBerg 120) and placed a heightened “emphasis on the supernatural dimensions of Christianity” (Marsden 158). Unlike most mainstream nineteenth-century Protestants, who were postmillennialists, the premillennialists did not perceive the current age as “a golden age that

would grow out of current cultural and social progress” (Marsden 157) and precede Christ’s return. Instead, they “believed that the millennium of peace and blessing would be established only after the second coming of Christ, and that the present age was one of corruption and apostasy, an era of violence and foreboding during which Christians were to wait, watch, and preach the gospel of repentance” (DeBerg 120).

DeBerg suggests that the “aspects of their culture [which] led them to conclude that society was rotting and that the end was near” (122) were undeniably connected to disruptions in middle-class, Victorian gender roles. “Two leading premillennialist journals, Brookes’s Truth, or, Testimony for Christ and Gaebelien’s Our Hope,” DeBerg notes, “declared that the new boldness and infidelity evident among women was a clear sign of the ‘end times’” (122-23). These journals condemned the publication of the Woman’s Bible and even “attacked women who were educated and kept up with the current intellectual debates” (DeBerg 123). Also, women who had leadership roles within the church were perceived as “another ominous sign of the tribulation to come” (DeBerg 124). “Specifically,” DeBerg says, “premillennialists contended that there was ‘an appalling increase of drunkenness among women,’ that too many marriages ended in divorce, that too few women were choosing to have children, and that ‘immodest fashions’ for women were ‘outward evidence of the hidden lasciviousness and corruption’ of ‘the days of Lot’” (124-25).

Likewise, DeBerg says that the idea of biblical inerrancy was critical to the fundamentalist theology, “because they saw in it the basis for a set of eternal and unchanging social norms, most of which set boundaries on private, gender-related behaviors and attitudes” (128). One fundamentalist writer of the early twentieth century, J. Frank Norris, for example, blamed “a departure from absolute faith in the truth and accuracy of the Bible” for “the decrease in birthrates and a ‘revolt against motherhood’ on the part of American women” (DeBerg 133). Historians of fundamentalism have also seen the issue of evolution as being of primary importance to the movement. Even here, DeBerg shows, debates over gender roles underlie fundamentalists’ arguments. In a “well-publicized and well-attended” (DeBerg 138) debate on evolution in 1924,

John Roach Straton began his speech by acknowledging how

The wave of animalism which is sweeping over the world today, and the degradation of the modern dance, the sensualism of the modern theater, the glorification of the flesh in modern styles, the sex suggestion of modern literature, the substitution of dogs for babies, the appalling divorce evil, have all come about because of this degrading philosophy of animalism which evolution is spreading over the earth (DeBerg 138).

DeBerg explains, “Straton was a gifted rhetorician. One must assume that the changing [sexual] mores of the 1920s were both a primary concern and his most effective and popular case against evolution because he began his part of the debate with such an appeal”(138). Furthermore, as far as modernism goes, DeBerg demonstrates how “The ‘crimes’ for which modernism or liberal theology was blamed were not felonious or violent; the ‘crimes’ mentioned were almost always deviations from conventional Victorian domestic patterns and sexual mores” (143). Marsden mentions how “In small town America young women who dared to be seen in the swimwear of the day (excessively discreet by later standards) were liable to be warned by guardians of the old order that they were risking the flames of hell” (197).

DeBerg argues that if historians of fundamentalism would examine the issue of gender-- “the sets of symbols and taboos that constitute a culture’s gender ideology, and the social behaviors and roles determined by culture” (147)--they would discover “a source of both widespread alarm and anger, and of internal unity and motivation that would account for fundamentalism’s wide and popular appeal” (147). Fundamentalism, and its close ally, revivalism, were undoubtedly popular. One Billy Sunday revival of 1917, reportedly drew 1,443,000 attendees. Six years earlier, there were already somewhere around 650 fundamentalist evangelists active in the U.S.; and between 1912 and 1918, historians have estimated that probably at least

35,000 revival campaigns took place (DeBerg 11). Perceiving fundamentalist arguments in terms of arguments about gender roles, DeBerg accounts for its popularity:

Every American of the late-Victorian era faced rapid and unprecedented changes in gender ideology and roles. Every American, rich or poor, postmillennialist or premillennialist, educated or uneducated, in cities or on farms, from the North or from the South, lived at a time when it was no longer clear just what it meant to be male or female. This uncertainty rocked the most basic aspects of human life and experience--self-understanding and esteem, sexual attitudes and behaviors, power and intimacy between mates, and bonds between parent and child (147).

While DeBerg is not saying that “every American” subscribed to a fundamentalist theology, she makes clear the point that fundamentalism arose in a time of unprecedented challenge to traditional gender conventions. Fundamentalism offered a voice to Americans who were concerned about the rapidly changing Victorian gender roles. Fundamentalism also provided many Americans with an idea of the Christian home as a sanctuary. DeBerg calls this the “divinized home” and states that “Language investing the home with sacred meaning and qualities reinforced both the location of religion and morality within the home and the election of woman as religious agent and moral guardian” (148). Furthermore, fundamentalism helped Americans who were appalled at “the revolution of manners and morals from 1910 to 1930” (DeBerg 148), most commonly associated with the image of the “flapper” girl, to make moral sense of the world and place blame where they felt blame should belong--not on themselves, politicians, or the structure of society, but on the increasing freedom people were taking with their “God-appointed” sex roles.

While the first wave of American fundamentalism slightly preceded the first wave of American feminism, it came to a head, to its “most rigid and belligerent phase” (DeBerg 148), in

the early twentieth century when the first wave of American feminism was at its peak. Likewise, the second wave of American fundamentalism (the late 1970s and the 1980s) followed and somewhat coincided with the second wave of American feminism. Conover and Gray write, “Just as [the second wave of] feminism began as a reaction to the traditionalism of the 1950s, the very success of the feminist movement spawned another movement: the pro-family sector of the New Right” (68). Just as the first wave of conservative Protestantism emphasized gender roles, the second wave was no exception. Frances Fitzgerald, in an article entitled “The Triumph of the New Right” in The New York Review of Books, states how Phyllis Schlafly based her condemnation of the Equal Rights Amendment on the argument that “Sexual freedom has dissolved the bonds of the society, leaving nothing but a quasi-criminal anarchy in the home, the workplace, and the school” (cited in Conover 71). Schlafly placed the blame for this “anarchy” on “women’s lib” and called for “strengthening the laws against it” (Conover 71).

A modern-era fundamentalist/pro-family group known as the Parents of Minnesota have released a statement that asserts

Man and woman have never been equal, aren’t equal and can never be equal as long as they exist. Each was given a different role, a role that complemented the other, roles that blend into a harmonious unit. This unit is called the family and the family is the core of society. Now society can be good or depraved, civilized or uncivilized. It either possesses order or chaos depending on the degree in which the male and the female sex roles are accepted or rejected. Thus, it is, that moral degeneration replaces moral virtues, and SOCIETY RETRACTS BACK, back, back INTO BARBARISM!! (cited in Conover 72).

Obviously from this statement, one can see that a desire for strict adherence to “traditional” sex roles is by no means a phenomenon of the past. Two of the greatest issues, in fact, for the “New

Right” or new fundamentalists were also two of the greatest issues for the second wave of feminists: the ERA and abortion. The fundamentalists and the feminists, of course, took opposing sides on these issues.

The women described by Conover and Gray, Yates, and Echols all committed vast amounts of energy towards protests, petitions, and other activism in support of the Equal Rights Amendment and revised abortion laws. They were not successful with the ERA. Conover and Gray, in fact, give a large part of the credit for its defeat to Phyllis Schlafly, who they attest “literally was the anti-ERA movement for many years and is the major figure in the pro-family sector of the New Right” (74). Schlafly was able to mobilize numerous resources: she had her own communication network (primarily the 3000 recipients of the Phyllis Schlafly Report) and money from her Eagle Trust Fund (Conover 74). An early supplement to her Report became the STOP ERA newsletter, which in 1981 had about 30,000 subscribers (Conover 74). Conover and Gray mention how “Schlafly immediately made a difference in the ERA ratification process” (74). Her impact could be seen in the fact that “By early 1973, only a few months after she had entered the ERA fray, nearly every ERA news story mentioned Schlafly” (Conover 74). Also in 1973, “she convinced legislators in Nebraska to rescind their earlier vote and was instrumental in Alabama’s defeat of the amendment” (Conover 74). By the end of the decade, Schlafly was at the fore-front of all the anti-ERA campaigns in the fifteen unratified states.

Conover and Gray, however, contend that “an issue like the ERA is chosen more for its symbolic value than because it would really hurt housewives” (71). The problem that Schlafly and other conservatives saw in the Equal Rights Amendment was not so much the amendment itself, as the greater issues which it supposedly signified. Schlafly, for instance, played upon conservative fears of the unknown and “easily...tied the ERA into a variety of distressing situations: homosexual marriages, abortion on demand, and the weakening of our nation’s defense” (Conover 80).

Atwood’s novel seems to be very aware of Schlafly’s presence and influence in the second

wave of American feminist backlash. The character of the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, bears an uncanny resemblance to Schlafly (with a little bit of Tammy Faye Baker thrown in for flavor.)

Offred recalls reading a profile of her in Time or Newsweek:

...she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all... We thought she was funny. Or Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest (Atwood 1985, 60-61).

The irony (and biting humor) of this part of the novel, nonetheless, rests on the fact that after the revolution Serena Joy must stay at home too. "She doesn't make speeches anymore," the narrator realizes. "She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood 1985, 61).

While Schlafly helped defeat the ERA, the women's movement was more successful on the issue of abortion rights. In 1973, Roe vs. Wade effectively legalized abortion upon demand throughout the nation. This was a key event in triggering religious conservatives to political action. Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition, argues that "Prior to the Roe vs. Wade decision, most religiously based citizen activism came from the left: the civil rights struggle, the antiwar movement, nuclear disarmament, and the push for social welfare spending" (59). Now, whether all religiously based action prior to 1973 had a left-wing orientation is debatable, as well as whether all of these "leftist" actions were always religiously based. What is significant about Reed's assertion, however, is that it recognizes Roe vs. Wade as a catalyst which hurled religious conservatives back into the political arena in significant numbers, for the first time since the turn of the century.

Conover and Gray explain that the anti-abortion effort has never had a single leader of

Phyllis Schlafly's stature. "Rather," they state, "the battle is led by a number of single-issue abortion groups, the largest of which is the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) which claims 11 million members" (Conover 87). Also, Conover and Gray contrast the positive tone of the names of the single-issue anti-abortion groups [American Citizens Concerned for Life, American Life Lobby, Americans for Life, Life and Equality, Pro-Life Nonviolent Action Project, etc.] to the defensive tone of the anti-ERA movements [Feminine Anti-Feminists, Grandmothers United Against the ERA, Housewives and Motherhood Anti-Lib Movement, Christian Women's National Concerns, Females Opposed to Equality, etc.] (87). By using positive imagery in their names, the anti-abortion groups are "united in their pro-life emphasis; they are trying to regain a lost good, not just protect a threatened good" (Conover 87). Similarly, in The Handmaid's Tale, positive sounding names like Angels, Aunts, and Guardians, which suggest support and protection, are given to individuals who have actually have crucial roles in limiting the freedom of women.

Beyond the single-issue abortion groups are the pro-family groups, multi-issue groups that focus on more than just abortion. Phyllis Schlafly's involvement in the anti-abortion crusade is placed within this category. Her Eagle Forum addressed a variety of issues, and yet it took a definite stand on abortion. In fact, Schlafly saw "a direct link between the ERA and abortion" (Conover 88). Conover and Gray explain that Schlafly "reasons that if the ERA were passed any restriction on abortion would be constructed as impacting only on one sex" (88).

The number of anti-ERA and anti-abortion groups, according to Conover and Gray's analysis, are staggering. In the Appendixes to their text, they list 130 national and state organizations opposed to the ERA and 75 organizations which seek to ban abortion. While not all of these groups have an affiliation with the religious right, the majority of them do, hence pointing to the profound potential of conservative Christian groups to effect legislation in the United States.

The Christian right has also demonstrated its potential to effect political elections. When Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in 1980 "with a margin that surprised pollsters"

(Wilcox 4), the media gave a big portion of the credit to Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority (Wilcox 4). In the November 1994 elections, Republicans won 53 House seats, eight Senate seats, 472 state legislative seats, and eleven governorships, “while the Democrats suffered the largest setback by a governing majority party since the New Deal” (Reed xv). Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition at the time, attributes these victories to the fact that thirty-three percent of all voters were “self-identified born-again evangelicals” or pro-family Roman Catholics, and of this thirty-three percent, “Fully 70%...voted Republican” (xv). “The change that hit this nation,” Reed writes, “was nothing short of a conservative tidal wave. It was the largest turnout of religious voters in modern history” (xv). That the 1994 election truly witnessed “the largest turnout of religious voters in modern history” is unlikely. Many Americans who regard themselves as religious always show up at the polls. Reed, however, uses general terms like “religious” and “Christian” to refer narrowly to Republican evangelicals or other Christians who advocate a conservative political agenda (such as Catholics who vote Republican because of that party’s stance on abortion.) What is true about the 1994 elections, nonetheless, is the influence which this group of religious conservatives had on the election. Clyde Wilcox points out that “Republican leaders have publicly acknowledged their debt to the Christian Right organizations that helped mobilize the turnout of white evangelicals” (3-4).

Confronted with the evident political influence of the religious right, the fact that some religious activists have taken rather extreme positions on a variety of issues has alarmed many Americans. One of Pat Robertson’s fundraising letters, for example, stated that “the feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians” (cited in Wilcox 9). Certainly, if Robertson made a remark like this to Betty Friedan, sparks would start to fly. Robertson exaggerates and distorts the goals of the women’s movement in order to strike fear into the hearts of his supporters. DeBerg would probably say that he also does this to play off of the concerns for the family and anxieties about

gender roles already present in the minds of many.

The power of the religious right has also prompted renewed debates over whether religion and politics should mix (especially when religious politics are extremist politics.) “The debate,” Wilcox notes, “is an ongoing one--indeed, it took place in the American colonies before the drafting of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights” (12-13). The controversy arises from two competing visions for American democracy: “One holds that the United States is a Christian nation specially blessed by God; the other maintains that it is a secular state with a high wall of separation between church and state” (Wilcox 13).

Wilcox goes on to say that the religious right typically takes an accommodationist stand regarding the establishment clause. That is to say, the religious right interprets the phrase “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” as merely prohibiting the establishment of a national religion, but not meaning that “the government may not prefer religion generally to nonreligion” (Wilcox 13). “Although accommodationists claim that the government must merely be neutral among religions,” Wilcox writes, “the specifics of their arguments usually imply that the government need remain neutral only among religions in the Judeo-Christian tradition and sometimes only among Christian faiths” (13). Separationists, on the other hand, feel that the purpose of the establishment clause is to emphasize, in the vein of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, the absolute separation of church and state (Wilcox 13-14).

With regards to the free exercise clause (“or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”), religious conservatives normally adopt a communitarian stand (Wilcox 13). “Communitarians,” Wilcox explains, “would argue that religious freedom for minority religious groups should be limited by community norms” (14). For example, “If state law prohibits the use of peyote in an effort to control drug use, then Native Americans should not use it in their age-old ceremonies, and if the U.S. Army denies recruits the right to any special attire, then orthodox Jews should not wear special religious headgear” (Wilcox 14). The alternative to the communitarian position, in Wilcox’s analysis, is the libertarian point of view. “Libertarians,” Wilcox states, “hold that all kinds of

religious practices are protected, including those of non-Christian groups” (14). The stands that the Christian right take on the two Constitutional clauses regarding religion make them what many scholars have called “Christian preferentialists” (Wilcox 15). Wilcox writes, “These individuals want a public role for Christian symbols and practices but resist the notion of non-Christian groups having equal access to public support” (15).

While many critics look at the Christian right’s position on a variety of issues as a threat to the civil liberties and rights of other Americans, Ralph Reed rejects these fears and asserts that conservative Christians merely want to gain “a place at the table” (xvi) and that “the answer to democracy’s ills is more democracy, not less” (37). He claims that the agenda of the Christian right is not extremist, but mainstream. If more “people of faith” (i.e., conservatively-oriented people of faith) were allowed to serve in public office, Reed professes, the world would not look like, “as some have suggested, a Victorian, patriarchal, proto-Nazi, crypto-Klansman, theocratic police state” (9). “These accusations,” he accuses, “are grounded not in fact but in fear and bigotry” (9). The bigotry which he speaks of is bigotry towards people of conservative religious faith.

Reed’s arguments do have some merit. The people whom the religious right has helped to gain office are not all white, upper-middle class males in support of the patriarchy. As a result of controversy in New York City schools over the Rainbow Curriculum, “a multicultural course that included instruction on the gay lifestyle to students as young as six years old” (Reed 7), an evangelical Hispanic woman, Linda Garcia, won election to the school board. Even Wilcox, who is generally critical of the Christian right, admits that “Most leaders of the Christian Right are committed to the democratic process and strongly supportive of the American political system” (142). Therefore, fears that the religious right might someday seize power and control American politics, “perhaps someday ruling by force as the Nazis did in Germany” (Wilcox 141), as conservatives do in Gilead, are, according to Wilcox, “almost certainly unfounded” (141).

Still, if the Christian right, as Reed attests, feels that “the answer... is more democracy, not

less” (Reed 37), how does one explain their general intolerance for more “liberal” groups? Wilcox cites one large study of religious activists which found that “Christian Right members most often identified liberal groups such as the National Organization for Women, the American Civil Liberties Union, and People for the American Way as the most dangerous to the country and were not especially willing to let members of such liberal groups take part in the political debate” (107). Furthermore, the extremists on the outskirts of the Christian right movement inspire in many fears of violence and severe intolerance. News accounts have often related incidents of bombings at women’s health clinics which perform abortions. Christian right leaders, like Jerry Falwell and Ralph Reed, condemn the violence of anti-abortion extremists and emphasize the fact that these individuals are not part of the religious right mainstream. The National Organization for Women, nevertheless, charges that “Jerry Falwell claims he doesn’t condone anti-abortion violence but paid \$10,000 toward Operation Rescue boss Randy Terry’s fine on a felony stemming from O.R.’s violent siege of women’s health clinics during the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta” (NOW web site, “Viewpoint: Promise Keepers Pose a Real Threat”). Also, theorists on the fringe of the Christian right, like the “Christian reconstructionist” Rousas John Rushdoomy, have made statements such as “a reconstructed America would have no room for Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Bahais, or humanists... or nonreconstructed Christians” (Wilcox 124). “According to Gary North, a leading reconstructionist writer,” Wilcox notes, “it is important to adopt the language of liberalism until the reconstruction has begun, but after that time, there is no reason to tolerate dissent” (124). Groups like the Christian reconstructionists are only a tiny fraction of the Christian right, “but their arguments are being increasingly incorporated in mainstream writing, including in recent books by Pat Robertson” (Wilcox 125).

The violence of extremists and the lack of tolerance combine with the use of militaristic language by many evangelicals to further intensify the fears of those opposed to the religious right. One of Jerry Falwell’s mentors, John R. Rice, had at one time a circulation of over 100,000 for his aptly entitled newsletter, The Sword of the Lord (Marsden 217). Furthermore, at a rally of 39,000

clergy in Atlanta in 1996, religious conservative and founder of the Promise Keepers organization, Bill McCartney, shouted from the podium, “Many of you feel like you’ve been in a war for a long time, yet the fiercest fighting is just ahead. God has brought us here to prepare us. Let’s proceed. It’s wartime!” (NOW web site, “Promise Keepers: A Real Challenge to the Right”). Such language, however, is not a new phenomenon. Betty DeBerg points out how historically, “Conservative evangelical clergy chose to understand and to depict themselves as warriors in God’s army, taking on any assault” (93). This adoption of militaristic language was primarily the result of male reactions to the feminization of the church. In 1909, in a speech designed to recruit college men for the ministry, Harold Arnold Walter described the work of a minister as “a great battle ground where tremendous forces are at war, and leaders of imperial mould are demanded” (cited in DeBerg 94).

Examples of such language are common both today and in the past. Atwood certainly was aware of this fact, for such imagery is also common among the supporters of Gilead. Offred notes the centrality of militaristic images to the Republic of Gilead when she acknowledges that the new government has imposed many changes, yet has not destroyed the library (even though women are no longer allowed inside.) Remembering the interior of the library, she speculates about carvings on the walls:

there are men fighting, or about to fight, looking clean and noble, not dirty and bloodstained and smelly the way they must have looked. Victory is on one side of the inner doorway, and Death is on the other. It’s a mural in honor of some war or other... They won’t have destroyed that
(Atwood 1985, 215).

The religious conservatives who created Gilead, in fact, have taken the use of militaristic imagery a step further and made it into fact: “It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the

Islamic fanatics at the time” (Atwood 1985, 225). Shortly thereafter, the Gileadan fundamentalists suspended the Constitution. Then Moira, ever observant, has a premonition of the regime’s future: “Look out, said Moira to me, over the phone. Here it comes” (225). “Here what comes?” the narrator asks. “You wait,” Moira replies. “They’ve been building up to this. It’s you and me up against the wall, baby” (Atwood 1985, 225).

None of the evangelical movements mentioned thus far have attempted to take actual military action, however. If Wilcox’s analysis is correct, they probably never will. Yet, in light of their use of militaristic imagery, they are obviously “fighting” for something. Bill McCartney told the clergy in Atlanta, “It’s wartime!” (NOW web site). Interestingly, the Promise Keepers have actually hired military officers to help organize branches of its ministry within the armed forces. Some of these officers include Richard Abel, a retired air force brigadier general who has been conducting PK “wake-up calls” with hundreds of active duty soldiers, and Jim Pack, a retired Green Beret colonel who was a psychological warfare specialist at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and is now PK manager of the Texas region (Swomley 10). The Promise Keepers, in fact, provide a useful, contemporary case study in examining the philosophies of the religious right and their relationship to the fears expressed in Atwood’s book.

Bill McCartney, former head football coach at the University of Colorado, founded Promise Keepers in 1990 with seventy-two men. By 1996, attendance at Promise Keepers rallies had reached a height of over 1.1 million men (PK Net, Fact Sheet). Officially, the Promise Keepers organization regards itself as “a Christian outreach to men” (PK Net, Fact Sheet). In 1990, McCartney and others “believed that there was a need for such a ministry as men in the church, unlike women, have historically not gathered together for Christian support and outreach” (PK Net, Q&A). Promise Keepers asserts that it is strictly a spiritually-oriented organization with no political agenda and no affiliation with the Christian Coalition or any other groups from the religious right (PK Net, Q&A). Many critics, nevertheless, contest this assertion. Joe Conason, Alfred Ross, and Lee Cokorinos have even gone as far as to label Promise Keepers, “the Third

Wave of the Religious Right” (11).

“Indeed,” Conason, Ross, and Cokorinos write, “Promise Keepers appears to be a new ‘third wave’ of the religious right, following the demise of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and the compromise of Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition with secular Republicanism” (12). Promise Keepers leader Raleigh Washington has even been quoted as saying, “There is no way this group can restrict itself when it comes to public policy. We are producing leaders in this organization. They will enter the political sphere” (cited on the NOW web site, “Myths and Facts about the Promise Keepers”). Most of the popular media, however, has overlooked the political significance of the organization. While PK leaders outwardly claim that the movement has no political agenda, the political ties of the leadership tell otherwise. In 1989, McCartney addressed an Operation Rescue rally, “which was trying to close a local women’s clinic, declaring that abortion had become ‘a second Civil War’” (Conason 14). Then in 1991, he joined the advisory board of Colorado for Family Values, “a statewide coalition of right-wing religious groups devoted to ‘educating Coloradans about the ‘gay’ lifestyle’ and opposed to civil rights statutes protecting gays” (Conason 14). Colorado for Family Values also sponsored the notorious Amendment 2 to the Colorado Constitution, which voters approved in 1992 but was subsequently struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Behind McCartney are figures such as Dr. James Dobson, “the social psychologist and radio commentator whose \$100 million Focus on the Family organization is one of the largest religious-right entities in the country” (Conason 13). Focus on the Family Publications printed the 1994 Promise Keepers book, Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper. “Dobson has many times declared that the U.S. should be a ‘Christian nation,’” says Frederick Clarkson (2). Each year Dobson holds hundreds of Community Impact Seminars throughout the country, “in which participants learn to answer the question, ‘what do we as Christians have to do to take control of our society?’” (Clarkson 2). Furthermore, with regards to the struggle to challenge any governmental leaders who do not act in accordance with God’s will, Dobson has declared, “I’m

prepared to pay with my life” (Clarkson 2). Ralph Reed also attests to Dobson’s influence, saying that his radio program was critical in alerting audiences about the Miller teacher-certification mandate, which was seen as a threat to home-schooling (158). Moreover, Conason, Ross, and Cokorinos state, “The political views of Dobson are reflected in the militantly antiabortion and antigay Family Research Council, the Washington lobby headed by Gary Bauer that Dobson founded and that has staked out a position to the right of the Christian Coalition” (13-14). Reed, in fact, lists Gary Bauer, a Promise Keepers supporter, as one of “the best and brightest” of the new right leaders and refers to his position as a former undersecretary of education and chief domestic policy advisor in the Reagan administration (192). Reed says, “Bauer and Dobson strung together a nationwide network of state-based pro-family think tanks to advocate the pro-family agenda at a local level” (192).

Bill Bright of the Campus Crusade for Christ, “whose involvement with the radical right dates back to the fifties” (Conason 12), is also a part of the PK leadership. In 1994, according to Ralph Reed, Bright joined with Pat Robertson, John Cardinal O’Connor, and Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention to sign “a historic declaration entitled ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together’” (14). This document outlined a consensus on the core beliefs of the Christian faith and had strong “political overtones” (Reed 14). Stephen Strang, “the religious-right media mogul” (Conason 12), publishes New Man, the magazine which was, until recently, the official voice of Promise Keepers. Pat Robertson, though not officially connected to Promise Keepers, has given PK “and its ‘prophetic significance’ steady exposure on the Christian Broadcasting Network” (Conason 12). Also, “Several PK board members belong to the Council for National Policy, a network of the most influential right-wing activists and funders in the country” (Minkowitz 70).

Skip Porteous, whom Nancy Novosad refers to as “an expert on the radical right” (25), serves as a policy analyst with the Institute for First Amendment Studies, an organization which, among other activities, “keeps track of communication on a Promise Keepers computer bulletin board” (Novosad 25). “It’s almost totally political,” Porteous says (cited in Novosad 25).

"They're building a list right now of 'godly politicians' to pray for" (cited in Novosad 25). The executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Barry Lynn, likewise, has referred to the Promise Keepers as "a powerful vanguard in religious-right activity" (cited in Novosad 25).

Nevertheless, "The political significance of the Promise Keepers," Conason, Ross, and Cokorinos suggest, "has eluded most of the media coverage lavished upon its stadium extravaganzas, which are bedazzling and often emotionally affecting for the reporters who cover them" (12). They point to ABC News's naming of McCartney as "Person of the Week" in February 1996 as "a signal of the generally positive attitude toward Promise Keepers in the secular media" (Conason 12). Many people, it seems, have something positive to say about the Promise Keepers. When Adrian Rogers, pastor of the 25,000 member Belvue Baptist Church in Memphis, attended the June 1997 Promise Keepers rally at Neyland Stadium in Knoxville, he said, "I think hope is coming out here" (Spellers 1997b, A12). Another man who attended the Knoxville rally, Ike Pinkston of Frankfort, Kentucky, commented that "These men around us are some of the finest human beings alive... We can laugh together, hug each other, love each other... And I'll tell you, I'm not a guy who can get into that real easily" (Spellers 1997a, A1, A7).

The wives of Promise Keepers and the women who volunteer at rallies also frequently speak up for the movement. The July 1997 issue of Promise Keepers News features a letter from Christine Simes of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, who says, "I just wanted to drop you a note to say how much PK has changed my husband's life. He is more devoted to God and his family because of the inspiration provided by this ministry...Thank you for challenging men to be filled with integrity. We as women are reaping the benefits" (PK Net, Correspondence). Another woman from Ohio, Lynn Corsin, speaks of her work as a Promise Keepers volunteer: "This whole event means a lot to me because it has made a great impact in my husband's walk with the Lord. I was so pleased and thrilled that I couldn't wait to do something to give back to Promise Keepers for what they have done for my personal house and our church" (PK Net, Serving with PK: Volunteer

Testimonies). Karen Rutledge of Knoxville wrote a letter to the editor of the Knoxville News-Sentinel, professing that “This is not a movement to be feared... This is a movement of the holy spirit in our land. This is a movement that encourages men to be men who are strong and gentle, loving and kind, able and courageous. This is about men being recreated in the image of Jesus Christ, the true masculine, not in power but in servanthood” (F4). More recently, in December 1997, Leigh Anna Stallings wrote to the editor of the News-Sentinel, “The Promise Keepers are an admirable organization, and I, as a feminist for the upcoming generation, would be proud to use not only great women but great men as well” (F4).

Donna Minkowitz, a Jewish lesbian feminist who dressed up in drag to sneak into the 1995 Promise Keepers rally at the St. Petersburg Thunderdome, adopting a position similar to Yates’s androgynous perspective, even compared elements of the Promise Keepers movement to the women’s movement. At the rally, Minkowitz observed,

In front of me three 20-year-old Promise Keepers raise their palms to Jesus and to each other, like women greeting their long-lost sisters. They sway with a very un-male delight... In a society where men are trained to reject and humiliate one another, it’s no wonder that simply getting close to other men can feel divine. Watching these three men blossom, I start to wonder if the key to men not oppressing women is for them to stop oppressing the woman inside (68).

Elsewhere, she says, “Some feminists may scoff at the Promise Keepers’ emphasis on men’s personal healing and self-growth. But I don’t see how society can change in the ways we want it to if men have no support to start acting less like ‘men’ and more like caring, loving, ethical, and nondominating human beings” (Minkowitz 71). Minkowitz quotes Promise Keepers board member Gary Oliver as saying, “A lot of the perceived differences between men and women are actually social in origin... We need to stop telling little boys that they should ‘take it like a man’...

One of the few emotions which men have been allowed to have is anger, and, unfortunately, many women, children, and other men have been victims of that" (cited in Minkowitz 71).

Yet, while Minkowitz affirms the need for a men's organization which helps men to become more "nondominating," she also recognizes "the contradictory impulses" (71) within the movement. "One of the reasons the Promise Keepers's politics is so incoherent," she writes, "is that our culture has few paradigms for the liberation of a dominant group from the shackles of its own domination" (Minkowitz 70). Moreover, while many Promise Keepers espouse an ideology of being caring and concerned husbands, they also employ the rhetoric of classic gender conventions. For every comment like Gary Oliver's, there are several which insist on masculine authority as the solution to society's ills. Bill McCartney once told the men at his a Promise Keepers rally, "You know, don't you, that we're raising our children at a time when it's an effeminate society. It's not the proper climate. We need young boys that are launched to be men and that has to be imitated for them by a godly man" (cited in Novosad 26). The key to becoming a godly man, according to the Promise Keepers, is scriptural study, prayer, and strict accountability to small men's groups. Dr. Misty Anderson, a professor at the University of Tennessee, however, has written, "The all-male Promise Keepers organization likes to hide its anti-feminist and anti-woman agenda under the mantle of community building and prayer groups for men" (F4).

Tony Evans, an African American pastor from Dallas and regular speaker at PK events, has won notoriety among many feminist groups for his declaration that men should "take back" their role as the leader of the household. Evans believes that the biggest problem facing society is the loss of the American family and that "the primary cause of this national crisis is the feminization of the American male" (73). In order to reclaim one's manhood, Evans says, "The first thing you do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: 'Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role'" (79). He continues, "Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not

suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back... there can be no compromise here. If you're going to lead, you must lead. Be sensitive. Listen. Treat the lady gently and lovingly. But lead!" (Evans 79-80). Elsewhere, Evans has stated his belief that "feminists of the more aggressive persuasion are frustrated women unable to find the proper male leadership" and that "The demise of our community and culture is the fault of sissified men who have been overly influenced by women" (NOW web site, "Promise of the Patriarchy").

"Judging by press accounts," Minkowitz notes, "Promise Keepers spokespeople have to spend a lot of their time 'explaining'--that is to say, minimizing--Evan's baldly patriarchal statements, but there are no signs of the group reining him in or kicking him off the speakers list" (69). Moreover, Minkowitz says, "Evans is hardly the only sexist speaker among the Promise Keepers" (69). When looking for further evidence of misogyny among the Promise Keepers, many critics often refer the time in 1989 when McCartney defended two of his University of Colorado football players that were accused of date rape. In a televised interview, McCartney stood up for his players, adamantly insisting that "Rape by definition is a violent act. It's an act whereby there's real physical violence involved. And so I don't think that's what we're talking about here, although that's what the charges are" (cited in Conason 14).

Nevertheless, at a Knoxville press conference just hours before the kickoff of the Neyland Stadium rally, Bill McCartney denied that Promise Keepers is anti-woman, saying, "What Promise Keepers is about is God answering the cries of wives" (Spellers 1997a, A1). To tone down their patriarchal and often misogynist statements and emphasize their commitment to servitude, at several conferences men have actually brought their wives and daughters up on stage and ceremoniously washed their feet (Swomley 12). Not all wives are pleased, however. Tanya Bennett of Knoxville expressed ideas contrary to those of Rutledge and Stallings in her letter to the editor of the News-Sentinel. She begins her letter with the statement, "As both a Christian and a woman, I applaud what the Promise Keepers are trying to do in response to the challenge of being responsible husbands and fathers and to respecting and supporting their brothers, regardless of

race, culture, or class differences" (F4). However, she continues, "an ideal marriage, it seems to me, can better be likened to a cooperative business partnership in which each partner has his or her own expertise but each has equal investment in the outcome of company decisions" (F4). "I propose," Bennett writes, "that a well-functioning family does not have a single leader. Instead of striving for leadership, parents should strive for a good, healthy, spiritually guided relationship" (F4).

Cynthia Bennett, the president of the Nashville chapter of NOW, told Stephanie Spellers, a reporter for the New-Sentinel, "They're saying men are the only ones who can be the leadership of the family because they're divinely ordered by the Lord to take that role... That's so offensive to me as a Christian woman... Yes, the Bible says the man should be the head of the family as Christ is the head of the church. But you have to look at the context, the time and who wrote it" (A12). The part of the Bible which Bennett is referring to is Ephesians 5:23. Donna Minkowitz points out that "both president and members" (69) of the Promise Keepers frequently cite this verse. Yet, for all the stage time that this single Pauline verse receives, another verse from one of Paul's letters is usually ignored. In Galatians 3:27-28, Paul says, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Another place in which the Bible offers conflicting statements about the status of women is in the two different creation stories presented in the Old Testament book of Genesis. The creation story found in Genesis 2 is part of what Biblical scholars refer to as the "J" document. It exhibits a very different writing style from the "P" document of Genesis 1 and has led many scholars to conclude that the two chapters were written by two different people. Religious conservatives who claim a biblical mandate for the subservience of women often cite the story in Genesis 2 which emphasizes Eve's creation from Adam's rib. These same conservatives, however, often de-emphasize the account in Genesis 1:26-27 which states, "And God said, Let us make mankind in our image and likeness, and let them have dominion... God created man in his image. In the image

of God he created him. Male and female he created them."

Christian feminists, such as Mary Daly, often look to biblical accounts like these to justify the equality of women. Furthermore, Daly, in her 1968 work, The Church and the Second Sex, notes that "biblical antifeminism does not occur in the words and actions of Jesus" (cited in Yates 69). Rather, "Jesus frequently departed from the custom of his times in treating women as respected persons" (Yates 69). A basic premise of Christian feminism is that if women are allowed more authority in the church to interpret scripture (namely through ordination and employment as clergy), then much of the anti-feminism that is falsely assumed to be inherent in Christianity could be corrected. Catherine Wessinger has listed certain features advocated by feminist theologians since the 1970s. These include 1) "a view that God is not solely masculine but instead sees the divine as either an impersonal principle or an androgynous combination of male and female elements;" 2) "a view of human nature that does not blame women for the fallenness or limitations of the human condition;" and 3) "a view of gender roles that does not insist that marriage and motherhood are the only roles available to women" (Wessinger 6). Wessinger further explains that "women can and do gain access to ordained leadership if these three factors are present along with the social expectation of equality" (6). She emphasizes the social expectation of equality, writing, "Even in alternative religions that do not see God as solely masculine and possess a view of human nature that does not scapegoat women and have broadened understandings of gender roles, women's leadership will decline if the social expectation of equality wanes" (Wessinger 6-7).

Within the Promise Keepers organization, however, God is seen as solely masculine. The Supreme Being is without fail referred to as "God, the Father" (PK Net, various pages). Men are expected to be the leaders of the household, as the testimonies of Tony Evans and others demonstrate. Also, when Bill McCartney declares, "At this special time in history, God has chosen to call his men out. There is a downward moral spiral that is jeopardizing this nation. It's time for the men of God to step forward" (Spellers 1997a, A7), he is not allowing any room for women clergy to address the moral crisis of America. In 1996, the Promise Keepers organization

spent \$4,609,726 in scholarships, transportation, lodging, and meals to get pastors to attend its clergy conference in Atlanta. That figure does not include the \$14,957,088 which PK spent on field ministries, working with pastors and churches before, during, and after conferences (Swomley 9). No women clergy were invited to this conference, even though in 1995, the Southern Baptists had 1,130 ordained women with 60 serving as pastors and 90 as associate pastors (Wessinger 394). In 1993, women constituted 17.7 percent of the ordained clergy in the United Church of Christ and about ten to twelve percent of all Protestant ministers in the U.S. (Wessinger 387). Furthermore, no women are allowed in the stadium during a conference. The only women present at the conference are the un-paid volunteers who work the concessions and sell PK merchandise. John M. Higgins describes the duties of female PK volunteers in domestic terminology. He says that the women at the conference were responsible for “taking care of the basic *chores* related to a well-run event of this size. They handled the sales of gate admissions, distribution of lunches, handing out of pamphlets, and assorted other business and *housekeeping* tasks” (Higgins 20).

The Promise Keepers base their insistence on male leadership on select biblical verses, such as Ephesians 5:23. John M. Swomley also suggests that “the men behind Promise Keepers believe essentially in a theology of political power achieved through religion. This is summed up in their concept of a Christian nation led by a military messiah... this political power is afforded only to male Christians under Vineyard Fellowship-type leaders” (10). The Vineyard Fellowship churches of Colorado is where McCartney and Promise Keepers got their start. These churches were noted for their “emotionally charged charismatic services” (Conason 18) and their use of a “shepherding” structure which “involves the creation of powerful controlling mechanisms among church members” (Conason 18). Such shepherding techniques were later employed by the Promise Keepers in the form of small “accountability” groups. “The concept of a Christian nation or a theocracy ruled from the top,” Swomley continues, “is based on fundamentalist ideology or selected verses from the Bible which justify such rule” (10).

“For example,” Swomley observes, “the Jesus of the New Testament repudiated a politics of domination when he said, ‘You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; for whoever would be great among you must be your servant’ (Mark 10:43-44)” (10). “But such teaching,” Swomley insists, “has no place in PK’s vision of building a Christian nation” (10). Instead, Promise Keepers leaders often cite verses such as Psalms 2:8. In fact, when Bill McCartney was asked in an interview what he saw for the future, he quoted this verse, replying, “Psalm 2:8 says, ‘Ask and I will give you the nation for your inheritance, the outer-most parts of the Earth for your possession’” (cited in Novosad 26).

Such selectivity has its parallels in The Handmaid’s Tale. Women are not allowed to read, so men have absolute control of the scripture. “The Bible is kept locked up,” Offred tells whoever cares to listen, “the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it” (Atwood 1985, 112). She is very much aware of the purpose of this action. “It’s an incendiary device,” she says, “who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?” (112). If, for example, the women were to get a hold of some of the teachings of Jesus Christ, they would have Biblical evidence of the Gileadan regime’s hypocrisy and selectivity. When the Commander starts to read, “It’s the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*. Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center” (Atwood 1985, 114). Atwood quotes Genesis 30:1-3 in the epigraphs to the novel: “And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die... And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.”

Paul Brians points out that these verses from Genesis are “one of several passages that make clear that in patriarchal Hebrew law it was perfectly legitimate for a man to have sex and even beget children by his servants (slaves), particularly if his wife was infertile” (2). He also qualifies Atwood’s sentiments, stating that “it is highly unlikely that the puritanical religious right would

ever adopt the sexual practices depicted in this novel; but she is trying to argue that patriarchal traditions which value women as fertility objects can be as demeaning as modern customs which value them as sex objects” (Brians 2-3). Another point that Atwood seems to be making is that in desperate times, when the Caucasian birth rate is at an all time low, desperate measures can be taken as long as they have a “Biblical precedent.” In the Epilogue to The Handmaid’s Tale, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, observes,

The need for what I may call birth services was already recognized in the pre-Gilead period, where it was inadequately met by ‘artificial insemination,’ ‘fertility clinics,’ and the use of ‘surrogate mothers,’ who were hired for the purpose. Gilead outlawed the first two as irreligious but legitimized and enforced the third, which was considered to have Biblical precedents (Atwood 1985, 386).

Beyond locking up the Bible, however, the scriptural instruction which the women of Gilead receive is limited only to those verses which serve the purposes and ideology of the Gileadan government. Very little mention is made of Jesus Christ, and when the women at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center are “re-educated” about the Beatitudes, certain parts, which might give the women a sense of hope or power, are omitted. Other parts are completely changed. “For lunch it was the Beatitudes,” Offred recalls. “They played it from a tape, so not even an Aunt would be guilty of the sin of reading. The voice was a man’s” (Atwood 1985, 114-115). The man on the tape reads, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent” (115). “I knew they made that up,” Offred confesses, “I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking. *Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted.* Nobody said when” (115).

At another point in the novel, Offred reminisces about “an open drawer, or a trunk in the

cellar, where the baby clothes are folded away, a lock of hair, cut when she [her daughter] was two, in an envelope” (Atwood 1985, 83). She no longer has any of these possession, however, and recalls Aunt Lydia’s instruction about “poverty of spirit.” Of course, Atwood is here throwing a little bit of irony into the picture. Aunt Lydia is telling the women under her control how “If you have a lot of things... you get too attached to the material world and you forget about spiritual values” (84). With this sentence, she is reminding the women of a sound spiritual principle, that if they are unattached to material possessions, they can reap spiritual benefits. Her next statement, however, is “You must cultivate poverty of spirit” (84). This is a superb example of Atwood’s brand of humor. At once, Aunt Lydia is, perhaps unknowingly, telling the women to accept material poverty as well as diminished spirits. Even in this passage, nevertheless, Atwood is able to point out the selective use of scripture in Gilead. After ironically telling the women at the Rachel and Leah center to “cultivate poverty of spirit,” Aunt Lydia refers to the Beatitudes, saying, “Blessed are the meek” (84). Offred, however, notices, “She didn’t say anything about inheriting the earth” (84).

Part of the purpose of the latter half of this paper has been to show some contradictions inherent in many of the philosophies and teachings of conservative evangelicals--particularly those concerning gender. Of course, one could also point to a number of other contradictions inherent in such movements and in groups like the Promise Keepers. The Promise Keepers, for example, at their stadium rallies, on their web page, and in their literature, emphasize the need for “racial reconciliation.” Bill McCartney tells members of the Promise Keepers, “as you lay your heart open to God, deal with any traces of racism you find there” (McCartney 162). He also says, “look around and find a few brothers from different denominational and ethnic heritages with whom you can start to build a relationship of trust and honor” (McCartney 166). James Garlington, the African-American master of ceremonies for a Buffalo, New York, rally, urged the crowd to “bring someone racially different from yourself to the march on Washington” (cited in Hetherly 15). Obviously, just as racial diversity became an issue for the women’s movement in the late 1970s

and early 1980s, it has also become increasingly important for conservative Christians.

Promise Keepers officially and proudly claims that a quarter of its board members and 32 percent of its full-time staff “are of ethnic backgrounds” (PK Net, Q&A). Yet, the crowds at its stadium events are usually overwhelmingly white (Hetherly 16, Conason 16, Higgins 20). Looking at such contradictions, many critics of the movement have suggested that PK’s policy of “racial reconciliation” is just a ploy to gain a larger African-American constituency for the religious right. Moreover, Wellington Boone, another of the Promise Keepers’s African-American leaders, has made such outrageous comments as “I believe that slavery, and the understanding of it when you see it God’s way, was redemptive” and “The black community must stop criticizing Uncle Tom. He is a role model” (NOW web site, “Promise of the Patriarchy”). The contradictions in the Promise Keepers’s espousment of “racial reconciliation” are too staggering to be fully explored in this paper, the focus of which is issues of gender as relating to Margaret Atwood’s novel. Perhaps the conflicts within PK’s attitudes about race, however, are best summed up by Mandy Carter, a field representative for the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, who says, “We are concerned that Promise Keepers calls for racial harmony but does not speak to its 96 percent white membership about the racial advantage that whiteness gives them in society. Institutionalized racism is not healed by hugs” (cited in Swomley 12). For someone interested in finding out more about the Promise Keepers stand on racial issues, most of the articles listed in the bibliography which deal with the Promise Keepers delve more deeply into this issue.

The Promise Keepers claim to have no political agenda, yet there is considerable evidence to demonstrate otherwise. In 1996, PK boasted of a budget of \$120 million, a staff of 500, thirty eight regional offices, and twenty-three conferences scheduled at football stadiums around the country (Novosad 27). The organization has enormous numbers of followers, and John M. Higgins, like many critics, is concerned about PK’s ability to manipulate men. He observes that a speech given by Dr. Stu Weber, at the 1996 Buffalo, NY conference, on the importance of small accountability groups, “epitomized the crowd-control techniques exercised throughout the

conference” (23). Higgins explains,

He used repetition of his various phrases and slogans and kept his audience physically active. From the opening of the talk, he announced that what he had to say was important and ordered everyone to turn to his neighbor and tell him to listen, saying, ‘You need to hear this message.’ Most of the men dutifully obeyed. Later, when talking about male groupings, he instructed everyone to, right there, form into groups of three or four... So men throughout the stadium got into circles of three or four, put their arms around each other at the shoulder, and followed the instructions on praying (23-24).

Later in the conference, when repentance became a topic, “attendees were encouraged to repeat, ‘It’s never too late’--which they did on cue” (Higgins 24). Higgins goes on to cite many more examples of the Promise Keepers brand of “crowd control.”

“The picture of so many men being directed in minute activities--such as repeating phrases and gestures--is not a comfortable one to a person like me who believes that democracy is challenged by mindless believers following those who lead,” Higgins writes. “These men were under control,” he continues. “Lured by a generic theology of great simplicity, then manipulated by ringmasters who play upon prior conditioning, thousands of men in Western New York were taken in by a comprehensive ploy aimed at reinforcing ideas from an era long past” (Higgins 24). According to Higgins’s analysis, the success of the Promise Keepers hidden political agenda will depend upon how well they are able to manipulate their followers. He states, “Promise Keepers knows full well that it can mentally soften up a crowd so as to enjoy more success with later, more complex actions: purchasing PK merchandise, starting accountability groups, taking charge of the family, and perhaps advocating right-wing political causes” (Higgins 24). Higgins’s argument ties directly to Amin Malak’s assertion that in The Handmaid’s Tale Atwood “tries to caution against

right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynistic theosophies that may be currently gaining a *deceptive* popularity” (12).

Still, many followers of the Promise Keepers have no intention of subscribing to a right-wing political agenda. Most attend the conferences for the same reason as Sam Long of Pennsylvania, “to have a closer walk with God” (cited in Hetherly 17). Ed Coke of Syracuse, New York, does not mention any misogynistic or right-wing ideology as influencing his desire to attend. Rather, he came to the 1996 Buffalo conference because “it reaffirms my faith in the Lord” (cited in Hetherly 17). One Promise Keeper supporter has even said that he thought he spoke for many men when he declared, “If this turns into the Christian Coalition, I’m out of here” (cited in Conason 19). Conason, Ross, and Cokorinos state that “Most of the men who attend Promise Keepers rallies don’t envision themselves as enlistees in a godly army marching to the cadences of Dobson and Bauer. Some are militantly anti-abortion and quite a few may be politically extreme by secular standards, but others are like many evangelicals, relatively apolitical” (19).

It is important to note the observation of Conason, Ross, and Cokorinos that many evangelicals are relatively apolitical. Nowhere in Atwood’s novel is it suggested that religion itself is dangerous. Rather, Atwood points a finger at rigid dogmas, misogyny, and political agendas disguised in the benevolent language of spirituality. In the Rachel and Leah center, Offred recalls, “What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen, and babies” (Atwood 1985, 251). The prayer which Aunt Lydia taught them went something like “Oh, God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man. Oh, God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled” (251). Offred, however, is able to find some peace in prayer, yet her prayer differs radically from Aunt Lydia’s:

My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within.
I wish you would tell me Your Name, the real one I mean. But
You will have to do as well as anything. I wish I knew what You

were up to. But whatever it is, help me to get through it please.

Though maybe it's not Your doing; I don't believe for an instant that
what's going on out there is what You meant (251-52).

In The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood does not criticize spirituality. By having Offred pray, she recognizes its essential purpose in human existence. Nevertheless, the connections between fundamentalist or evangelical brands of religion and feminist backlash, militarism, and right-wing politics concern her and many other critics. Of course, feminist backlash, militarism, and right-wing political agendas are not isolated to the religious right. Numerous examples of such ideologies are evident in the popular culture--the television shows, the movies, the song lyrics--experienced in everyday life. John Storey maintains that popular culture is highly ideological, whether the ideas promoted are dominant or subordinate in relation to the larger society (4). Atwood acknowledges many of the disturbing elements of contemporary culture in her critique of what Malak refers to as the "decadent present" (13). Nevertheless, the adoption of such ideologies by religious organizations and the masking of agendas in religious language are especially frightening because religion touches the most personal realms of human life. Conservative religious movements, such as the Promise Keepers, express a desire to influence, if not dictate, very intimate human concerns. They attempt to mandate how a person should relate to his or her idea of divinity. They also want to determine for women questions which only women can answer, such as when and if they should bear children, when and if they should get married, and how they should act in relation to men.

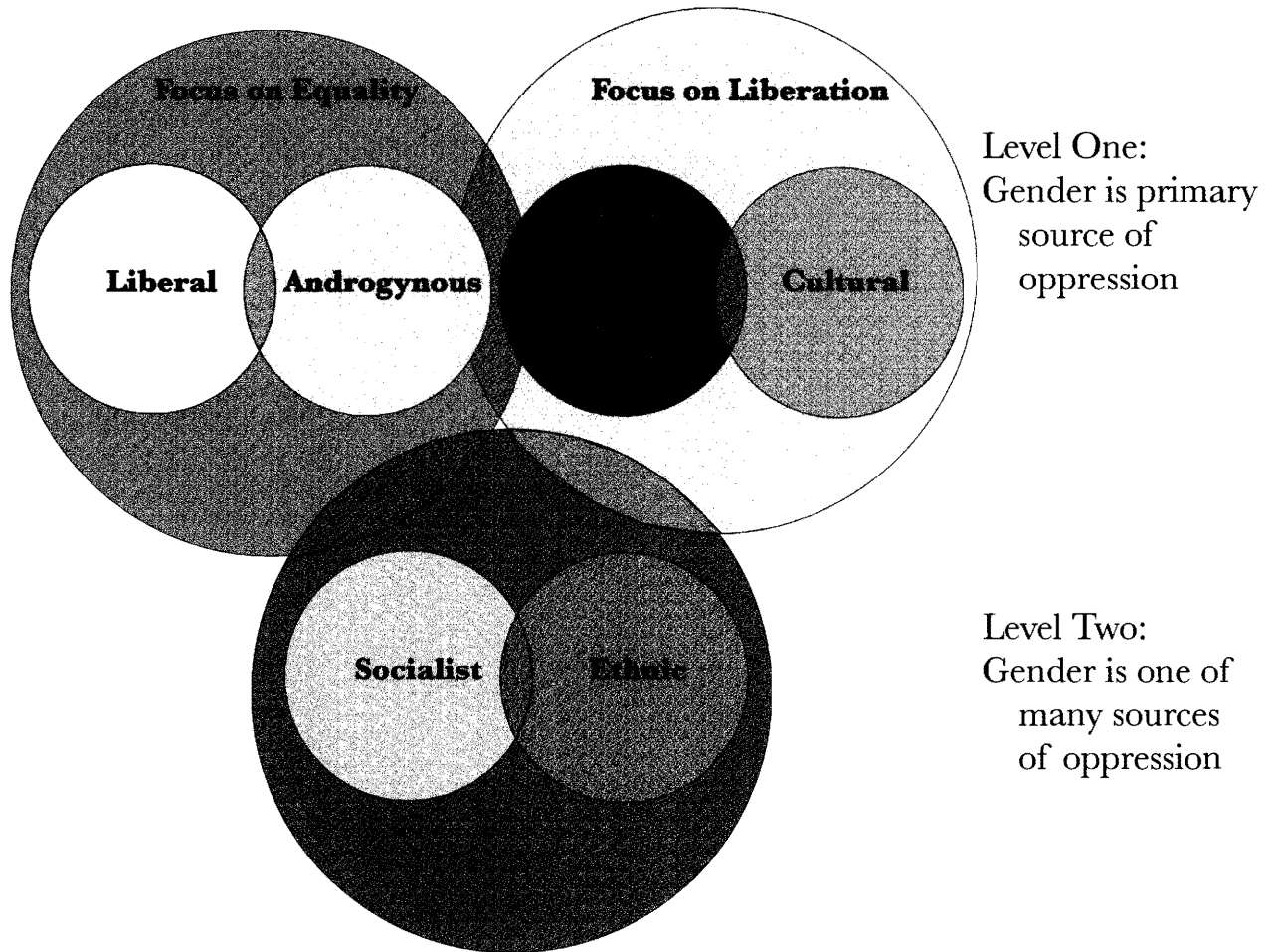
The fears inspired by the religious right tie directly to the assertion of Echols's radical feminists that the "personal is political" and the "political is personal." The difference between the feminists and the religious conservatives, however, is that while the former group seeks to reduce restrictions on personal life, the latter typically seeks to impose more. Atwood aligns herself with the supporters of the women's movement in this respect. Atwood does point to the inconsistencies within the women's movement, yet her greatest concern appears to be the coupling of religion and

personal politics.

In her epilogue, a parody of scholarly symposium, she drives her criticism of oppressive religious dogma home, by taking a closer look at the scholarly goal of objectivity. In light of Offred's very serious plight throughout the rest of the book, Dr. Piexoto's comment that "we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans" (Atwood 1985, 383) seems ridiculous. The bulk of The Handmaid's Tale is Offred's narrative, and one could hardly look at this as an objective historical account. In actuality, Offred's narrative inspires a wide range of emotions, most of which are highly disturbing. Atwood's novel does not seem to suggest that conservative religious organizations like the Promise Keepers might actually turn their rhetoric of "taking the nation for Christ" into action and fact. Most of the practices of the Republic of Gilead are too outrageous and extreme to be directly linked to the goals of conservative Christians. Nevertheless, like Swift and Dryden and all of the great (albeit, male) satirists that have come before, Atwood uses the literary device of exaggeration to drive her cautionary message home. The drastic changes enacted by religious conservatives in Atwood's novel most likely (and hopefully) will never become an American reality. Yet, through her creation of a poignant dystopia, Atwood points to genuine trends in American society. She exaggerates these trends to "make clear their most negative qualities" (Brians 2). In doing so, Atwood seems to be saying, "This probably won't ever happen, but always keep your eyes open."

APPENDIX

Diagram of Triangular Structure of Women's Movement



Liberal: Sought equal opportunities for women in already established institutions
Androgynous: Sought shared responsibilities by women and men and the creation of new institutions by both women and men
Radical: Sought total liberation from a male-dominated society and the creation of new institutions by women
Cultural: Sought to create and retreat into a women's culture
Socialist: Recognized capitalism, as well as gender, as a source of oppression
Ethnic Minorities: Recognized racism, as well as gender, as a source of oppression

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