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# Divine Fluidity: Shifts of Gender and Sexuality in Conservative Christian Communities

Sarah Stewart Burgess

*Pomona College*

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# **DIVINE FLUIDITY**

*Shifts of Gender and Sexuality in Conservative Christian Communities*

Sarah Stewart Burgess

Thesis Submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, Pomona College  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

Submitted on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Readers:  
Professor Katrina Van Heest  
Professor Pardis Mahdavi

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*For JLB*

## ***Abstract***

This thesis draws on ethnographic research from three communities of conservative Christian women who find empowerment and agency through their religious traditions. Two communities are politically active, outspoken women who also believe strongly in “traditional” roles for women, and one community idealizes conservative standards of sexuality while accepting women who work as sex workers. These women did not view their positions as contradictory, rather, they used religious beliefs and religious practices to enact, embody or explain their complex genders and sexualities. This thesis draws on ethnographic, feminist and queer theories while showcasing the diversity within a movement largely believed to be monolithic. The researcher aims to encourage more dialogue between liberal feminists and conservative Christians.

## *Acknowledgements*

Writing is always a collaborative process, and in particular, ethnography relies on the participation and generosity of others. First and foremost, this thesis could not have been written without the women who were kind and open enough to share their stories with me. I am grateful to have met and learned from them, and I thank them for trusting me and welcoming me into their communities. Though they may not agree with all the analysis in this paper, I hope they can see that I have respect for each one of them, and I wish them well on whatever paths they may take in life.

In addition, I could not have conducted this project without the help of several supportive professors. Prof. Erin Runions initially stimulated my interest in conservative Christianity in her class *The Celluloid Bible*. She led me through an independent reading course on conservative politics and Christianity in the summer of 2007, helped me craft the original proposal for this research, and advised me as I began this project in the summer of 2008. Even though she was on sabbatical as I started the writing process, she continued to be responsive to my questions, even while busy with her own work. Professor Pardis Mahdavi has also continually advised me throughout the research for this project, and offered numerous critiques, ideas and book suggestions. I am deeply grateful to her for encouragement, and for the endless insights she has offered me in her classroom, during her office hours, and over hundreds of e-mails. Prof. Katrina Van Heest generously agreed to be my reader without ever having met me before. She offered expansive critiques and suggestions on multiple drafts. I always looked forward to meeting with her, and appreciated her sense of humor and her passion for issues of gender and religion. Finally, Prof. Zayn Kassam has been a sympathetic, supportive, compassionate advisor throughout my time at Pomona. She offered some of the first criticisms and ideas for this thesis.

Prof. Jerry Irish, Prof. Darryl Smith, Prof. Lara Deeb and Prof. Kyla Tompkins also offered their critiques and ideas throughout the process. Prof. Tanya Erzen gave me essential (and much needed) advice about approaching interviewees and participating with conservative Christians when I first began to research. Throughout the summer of 2008, I counted on Prof. Shawn Maloney to be at Politics and Prose to tell me a joke, encourage me, and forward me long lists of anthropological books to read. Finally, I am so happy to have spent my senior year within walking distance of the Prof. Oona Eisenstadt, who has consistently offered both encouragement and good cheer.

I am also most grateful for the various financial support that made this research possible. The initial research for this project was funded through a Pomona College Summer Undergraduate Research Grant. The Pomona College Religious Studies Department, Dean Miriam Feldblum and Dean Cynthia Selassie provided additional funding so I could continue to conduct research in the Southwestern United States. Finally, the anthropology department lent me expensive recording equipment for nearly a year.

In addition, I am so thankful to be a member a community of peers who challenge me to rethink my own ideas and inspire me with their humor and tenacity. Numerous friends and students—Alix Coupet, Julianne Bukey, Anoush Suni, Josh Harris, Katie Jones, Chloe Wardropper and Andrew Kushner have read drafts or offered me feedback and ideas. Throughout the Religious Studies senior seminar, all fellow majors asked questions that helped me frame and shape this thesis.

Furthermore, I am so lucky to have a family who has supported me and loved me throughout my exploration of random interests, and given me the best education, ever. My father John, my mother Karen and my sister Katharine all read early drafts and sent back questions and comments which probed me to expand on essential ideas and themes.

This thesis is dedicated to the strongest woman that I know—Jeanette L. Buck. Though I have only recently officially discovered the joys of ethnography, she gave me the original skill set that I drew on throughout this process. She has taught me to always ask questions, say hello to strangers, talk back, and keep my chin up. I am inexpressibly grateful and overjoyed to have her as a mentor, counselor, family member and friend.

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## ***Preface***

On September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008, *Saturday Night Live* produced a short sketch in which two actors dressed up as Governor Sarah Palin (Tina Fey) and Senator Hillary Clinton (Amy Poehler) stood at a podium to address the nation and ask the media to stop using sexist language. Towards the end of the pseudo press-conference, Palin looked straight into the camera, and spoke to the audience in an exaggerated Alaskan accent: “No matter what your politics, I think we can agree that its time for a woman to make it to the White House!” Clinton’s face contorted, and she responded “No! Mine!” and later ripped some wood off their podium.<sup>1</sup>

The recent nomination of Sarah Palin as the Republican Candidate for Vice President of the United States underlined some of the conflicts between liberal, progressive feminists and conservative Christian women. Many liberals were upset that after decades of their dedicated activism for the right to choose, the woman closest to the white house was so anti-choice that she said did not believe in abortion, even in cases where a teenager is raped.<sup>2</sup> Others were angry that the Republicans called Palin’s

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<sup>1</sup> “Clinton/Palin Open,” *Saturday Night Live*, September 13, 2008, [http://www.nbc.com/Saturday\\_Night\\_Live/video/clips/palin-hillary-open/656281](http://www.nbc.com/Saturday_Night_Live/video/clips/palin-hillary-open/656281) (accessed September 21, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> For examples of such criticism, see Sam Stein, “Palin on Abortion: I’d Oppose Even if My Own



critics “sexist” when conservatives did not seem particularly concerned about gender-biased comments towards the Clinton campaign.<sup>3</sup> And, even more infuriating for leftist and liberal women, presidential candidate Senator John McCain gained speed and momentum after adding Palin to his ticket (at least temporarily).<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the campaign season, my e-mail inbox flooded with endless editorials, blogs and chain letters that called Palin “anti-woman.” But, there was one giant Republican elephant in the room that was not closely addressed in the anti-Palin electronic frenzy: there were large crowds of cheering women who rallied behind Palin at speeches. There were women who agreed with her pro-life beliefs, and there were thousands of them who punched the hole next to McCain/Palin on November 4, 2008. For all the interchange about Palin’s anti-woman positions, there was comparatively little in-depth, widespread discussion about why millions of women would choose her and take part in a movement that seems to disadvantage them. Rather, throughout the popular liberal and academic discourse, there were two particularly prevalent and problematic approaches for talking about the candidate and the conservative Christian women as a group.

The first common approach to understanding conservative Christian women is to argue that they are brainwashed, indoctrinated or used by men. For instance, in an editorial in the Los Angeles Times after the Palin nomination, Gloria Steinem made it

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Daughter was Raped,” *The Huffington Post*, September 1, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/01/palin-on-abortion-id-oppo\\_n\\_122924.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/01/palin-on-abortion-id-oppo_n_122924.html) (accessed March 13, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Alex Spillius, “John McCain team declares war on media over ‘sexist’ treatment of Sarah Palin,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, 10 September 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/uselection2008/johnmccain/2677119/John-McCain-team-declares-war-on-media-over-sexist-treatment-of-Sarah-Palin.html> (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Frank Newport, “Republicans’ Enthusiasm Jumps After Convention,” September 8, 2008, Gallup Incorporated, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110107/Republicans-Enthusiasm-Jumps-After-Convention.aspx> (accessed September 26, 2008).

clear that she did not want to “beat up on Palin.” She called Palin “wrong” on a number of issues, but also wrote that “the culprit here is John McCain.”<sup>5</sup> According to Steinem, the Republican men around Palin were exploiting her for their own political gain. Steinem’s analysis is not unique. Other scholars have gone further than her and argued that conservative Christian women are merely the tools of male leaders. In her book *Godly Women*, anthropologist Brenda Brasher notes that if these women are credited as being active agents within their movement, often they are said to be “essentially dedicated to furthering the goals and ideas of fundamentalist men.”<sup>6</sup> In the ethnography *God’s Daughters*, R. Marie Griffith also critiques condescending attitudes towards conservative Christians. In particular, she takes issue with the arguments of the late radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, who contended that the “Right in the United States today is...controlled almost totally by men and built largely on the fear and ignorance of women...Every accommodation that women make to this domination, however apparently stupid, self-defeated or dangerous, is rooted in the urgent need to survive somehow on male terms.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Dworkin assumes that millions of women across the United States are oppressed, and compromise their livelihoods in order to “survive.” She portrays them as docile, child-like individuals without the ability or desire to stand up for themselves. In a way, she herself perpetuates patriarchy by solely crediting men for the successes of this powerful American movement.

The other common liberal approach is to label conservative Christian women “hypocrites.” The Saturday Night Live skit made this critique by representing a Sarah

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<sup>5</sup> Gloria Steinem, “Palin, Wrong Woman, Wrong Message,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-oe-steinem4-2008sep04,0,1290251.story> (accessed September 21, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Right Wing Women*, (New York: G.P Putnam’s Son’s, 1983), 34, quoted in R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 204.

Palin who poses for the crowd like a fashion model, right after asking the media to stop objectifying women. Countless bloggers mocked Palin for opposing comprehensive sex education, yet having a pregnant teenage daughter herself. In another Saturday Night Live skit, Fey as Palin indicates that she is uncomfortable supporting same-sex couples, but then looks dead on into the camera and says, "I believe marriage is a sacred institution between two unwilling teenagers."<sup>8</sup> The "hypocrite" critique is made not only of Sarah Palin, but also of other politically and socially active Christian women. In a recent article in the New York Times, conservative Christian and anti-feminist activist Phyllis Schlafly comments that "'In the scale of liberal sins, hypocrisy is the greatest, and they have always considered me a hypocrite."<sup>9</sup> These women are often criticized for appropriating certain elements of feminism (like the notion that women should have voices in the political sphere) while rejecting the movement as a whole.

As the campaigns for the election of 2008 continued, many leftist and liberal women across America held their breath and hoped that Senator Barack Obama would be elected to the presidential office. I count myself among these women. Due to the unending anxiety and media obsession around the campaigns, I (along with many others), found solace and cathartic relief in the humorous chain e-mails on Palin and the scathing satires of Tina Fey. At times, liberal, leftist and progressive media did make legitimate critiques of the Vice Presidential candidate. For instance, some of them pointed out inconsistencies in her policies, or asked if her beliefs on climate change would engender sound environmental policies.

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<sup>8</sup> "VP Debate Open: Palin/Biden," *Saturday Night Live*, October 4, 2008, [http://www.nbc.com/Saturday\\_Night\\_Live/video/clips/palin-hillary-open/656281](http://www.nbc.com/Saturday_Night_Live/video/clips/palin-hillary-open/656281) (accessed March 15, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Gina Bellafante, "At Home with: Phyllis Schlafly, A Feminine Mystique All Her Own," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2006, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C04EFDB1530F933A05750C0A9609C8B63> (accessed March 14, 2009).

While there were some respectful criticisms of Palin's politics, it was troubling that condescension overwhelmed, and continues to overwhelm, the discussion about conservative Christian women as a group. The "hypocrite" or "indoctrinated tool" approaches allow liberals to feel smarter and superior to conservative Christians; but these paradigms are also too simple, misleading and unproductive. To call a conservative Christian woman a pawn of men does not acknowledge that she has the power to act and formulate her own opinions. This approach also denies that these women have very real motivations and reasons for holding their specific beliefs, and discredits them for their actions and contributions. Finally, these models allow progressive feminists to avoid having serious discussions about why these women have chosen their particular party affiliation and religious tradition. Surely, the women who supported Palin do not see themselves as hypocrites, but have complex ways of explaining and articulating their political commitments and their ideas on gender and sexuality.

There is something else deeply problematic about the "tool" and "hypocrite" frameworks. In addition to being condescending, they present the experiences of Christian women as flat, monolithic and unchanging. Fey's Palin seemed trapped in a framework of idiocy, and became increasingly moronic every Saturday night. When liberals or feminists call Christian woman trapped by men, they leave these woman little space for evolution and self-definition. Likewise, to name them "hypocrites" glosses over the fact that the gender roles in conservative Christian communities have evolved and changed greatly over the past few decades. Perhaps apparent inconsistencies within the movement are actually signs of its multifaceted origins and diversity, and women's complicated positions within it today.

This thesis will expand upon the current dialogue about politically and socially active conservative Christian women. Instead of simplistically judging them as inconsistent or unintelligent, liberal feminists need new models that recognize the multidimensionality of their motivations, desires and identities. I will argue that conservative Christian women are not indoctrinated subjects but influential women with drive and the ability to act. Their agency and empowerment, however, may look slightly different than what feminists typically conceptualize. Their empowerment can be produced through religious practice and belief, and their agency is not necessarily embodied through resistance to patriarchal systems.

From the summer of 2008 through the spring of 2009, I spent time researching three distinctly different communities of conservative Christian women, seeking to understand their motivations, their passions and their intents. I focused on communities that seemed especially perplexing from the outside: women who make public efforts to promote “family values” while working outside the domestic sphere themselves, and women who hold conservative beliefs on sexuality while reaching out to women in the sex industry. I sought to learn more about the faith of these women, and become aware of how it functioned within their lives. I was curious to see how women found influence and voice in what is commonly considered to be a patriarchal political and religious movement, and interested to see how they understood what seemed to me to be inconsistencies. Instead of applying the problematic tool/hypocrite paradigms, I looked for new theoretical frameworks to understand their actions and beliefs. I found that the communities that I studied were so diverse that there was not one particular framework that resonated for all of them; rather, I needed multiple approaches from ethnographic,

feminist, psychological and queer theories in order to begin to understand their lives and experiences.

On the whole, I found that there is actually a certain degree of fluidity and evolution within different strands of conservative Christianity. In each population that I studied, women honored and revered similar strict, set frameworks for gender and sexuality. However, at the same time, the women in these particular communities often transcended these frameworks themselves, creating the dynamic that outsiders often call hypocrisy. These women used varying tools to find agency and space to negotiate gender and sexuality, while maintaining a faith tradition that was deeply important to them. In fact, I found that these tools were actually coated over with religious language, and even became a part of religious practice and beliefs. I call such instances (when faith is utilized to enact, embody or explain shifts of gender and sexuality) moments of “divine fluidity.”

Within each community that I studied, I observed separate but related instances of divine fluidity. Some women cultivated complex, multi-faceted identities that allowed them to operate differently in different spheres and contexts, sometimes in a “modern” role, and sometimes in a more “traditional” one. These women maintained these identities through their belief in an all-powerful God who had specifically created a complex life destiny for each one of them. In another community, women remolded doctrines of “submission” from their faith to find empowerment for themselves, and created acceptance for individuals who might not always conform to the rules on sexuality. Finally, other conservative Christian women transcended conventional gender roles through spirit-filled prayer and certain religious and public practices.

The first chapter of this thesis provides background and definitions for the rest of this work. I will offer a short history of conservative Christianity in the United States, and provide an explanation of the definitions and terms that I will use throughout the paper. In addition, I will briefly discuss the work of previous ethnographers who have also sought to understand conservative Christian women, and situate my work among their findings. Finally, I will also discuss my methodology, personal biases and positionality.

Chapter two will explore the life narratives of powerful Christian women on Capitol Hill. These women, like Sarah Palin, are often labeled hypocrites for participating in the professional political world while simultaneously fighting to uphold a traditional family structure. I will try to move beyond this simplistic understanding by using Robert Lifton's psychological theory of the protean self. Christel Manning first uses this theory to understand conservative Christian women in her ethnography *God Gave Us the Right*.<sup>10</sup> This theory refutes the idea that there is a "normal" subject with "one primary identification" and "people with multiple or shifting identities are psychologically disturbed."<sup>11</sup> In today's world, Lifton argues, people have so many stimuli and interact with so many others that it is impossible to hold a completely fixed, stable identity. Rather, the contemporary human living in an industrialized nation must cultivate complex, multi-faceted ways of being and operating and constantly adjust to the shifting circumstances of today. The professional women I interviewed had multifarious identities, and switched roles and behaviors as they navigated through

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<sup>10</sup> Christel Manning, *God Gave Us the Right* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 156-159. Manning summarizes Robert Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

different spheres of society. They maintained these complicated identities through their belief in a God who had specific and individual plans for each one of them.

Chapter three is based on ethnographic work that I completed in the Southwest United States among a ministry that I call Ladies of the Lord.<sup>12</sup> This group of women performed outreach to women in the sex industry and encouraged them to find faith and surrender to Jesus Christ. To an outsider, these women may seem as paradoxical as the professional women on Capitol Hill: why would women who believe in abstaining from sex until marriage work with women who are breaking those standards through their work? In this section, I use the theory of anthropologists who have explored ideals of submission and located the agency of conservative religious women. In this chapter, I look at the different meanings that submission has for women in Ladies of the Lord. I argue that these women saw submission and patriarchal readings of religious texts as tools of empowerment and community. In addition, for this particular ministry group, submission to God was not understood to be a one-time act, but rather, a fluid process. Through the belief in a fluid submission, the Ladies could still find acceptance while they were not conforming to the exact rules of gender and sexuality. This understanding had unique implications for the outreach work that this group conducted among sex workers.

In chapter four I discuss another group of women in Washington, DC, who belonged to a center of worship that I call Prayer House for Christ (PHC). This group spent the majority of their time praying that abortion would end and revival would come to America. The women of PHC also believed strongly in traditional gender roles,

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<sup>12</sup> In an effort to protect the privacy of my interviewees, all names and identifying factors of individuals and groups have been changed in this thesis. I will further explore methodology in the following chapter.



yet they engaged in a sort of political protest, and several of them dressed in ways that defied traditional expectations and representations of young women. Instead of dismissing these women as hypocrites, I look at the ways that certain practices and beliefs within their community promoted countercultural attitudes, and allowed for moments where women could transcend normative identity frameworks, and, in some cases, traditional gender roles. I argue that this group, which could be called “right-wing” actually shared common elements with radical leftist and queer groups.

In the conclusion I argue that there needs to be more dialogue with conservative Christian women. A few friends criticized me for the work I did this summer, and believed that I was compromising my own progressive political stance by acknowledging that the experiences of women from the so-called Christian Right were worth acknowledging and examining. Some believed that I would become a part of the “God-squad” after spending weeks with Christians. Anthropologists and sociologists working in Christian communities have faced similar criticism. For instance, when Tanya Erzen presented her work on Christian ex-gay movements at conferences, audience members constantly asked her if she was a born-again Christian herself.<sup>13</sup> Faye Ginsburg recounts that she often received hostile responses when offering her analysis and understanding of pro-life women, whom people in her audiences believed to be “the enemy.”<sup>14</sup>

This thesis, for the most part, will not aim to show that liberal feminists are wrong and that conservative Christian women are correct. Nor will I will not spend serious time deconstructing conservative Christian beliefs to show why I feel they are problematic or patriarchal. I identify as a feminist, and at times throughout this work I

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<sup>13</sup> Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Faye Ginsburg, *Contested Lives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 223.

have been tempted to write pages in disagreement with some of the viewpoints I encountered, particularly the beliefs on abortion, marriage, Israel, gender roles, feminism, immigration, sex work, “human trafficking” and sex education. However, I have tried to refrain from doing this, as there is plenty of academic literature that refutes these beliefs already. Rather, I hope to develop a better understanding of people who hold these beliefs and locate their agency. I hope to show that there are more complicated ways of understanding them than the paradigms currently offered in the mainstream media and in feminist discourse.

## ***I. Introduction: Evolutions in Faith, Identity and Ethnography***

*Sarah: And how do you identify faith-wise? Would you say you are a Christian? Or a particular kind of Christian?*

*Becky: I would say that I'm a Christian and leave it there.*

Many of the women that I interviewed hesitated to choose a label for their religious identity, even when I explicitly asked them to do so. The various categories that could be used: “evangelical,” “Pentecostal” or “fundamentalist” have emerged out of Christianity’s long and complicated history in the United States. In fact, this thesis is rich with terms pertaining to religion, gender, power and sex that have controversial, convoluted and complicated meanings. Before proceeding with my own arguments, I will lay out my own definitions of some of these words, with the hopes of avoiding misunderstandings in the future chapters. Following the explanations of terminology, I will briefly discuss the work of other ethnographers who have done similar projects on Christian women, and highlight how my findings compare and contrast with those from other studies. Finally, I will go into more depth about my own research methods, and briefly discuss my own bias and positionality in the field. This chapter provides framework and context before this thesis explores the divine fluidities of each conservative Christian community. However, this chapter also contributes to the

greater argument of this paper, which showcases the instabilities of set frameworks for gender and sex, even in communities where such frameworks are of utmost importance. This chapter shows evolutions and flexibilities within larger contexts: language around gender and sex is unstable and constantly changing, the “Christian Right” and studies of it have evolved over time, and my own methods as a junior ethnographer greatly shifted and changed throughout the months of research.

### *Shifts of Faith*

I will start by briefly examining the evolutions of Christianity in the United States. Several of my informants asserted that America has been “Christian nation” from its beginning. This idea is debatable, but it is certain that American Protestantism has a long and complicated history that began as soon as European settlers set foot in New England. In 1630, John Winthrop famously declared that his group of settlers was to create a Christian “city upon a hill” and set a shining, pious example for the rest of the world.<sup>15</sup> Today, Protestantism is practiced in a myriad of ways in diverse spaces and places throughout the country. Words like “evangelical,” “born-again” and “charismatic” are often used interchangeably to describe all conservative Christians. In reality, each one of these labels has a distinct meaning, and surfaced at a particular point in history. The diverse etymologies and origins of these words show that Christianity within the US has not been static, but constantly responding to greater political, cultural and technological shifts in American society.

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<sup>15</sup> John Winthrop, “Sermon on the Passage,” in *The Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, ed. Robert Winthrop, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1869),19.

Before the start of the twentieth century, the majority of Americans subscribed to “revivalist or evangelistic” protestant Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Evangelical Christians, according to scholars Emerson and Smith, can be defined in this way:

In contrast to those who might cite human reason, personal experience, tradition, or individual preference as convulsive authorities for truth, evangelicals hold that the final ultimate authority is the Bible. Stemming from this, evangelicals believe that Christ died for the salvation of all, and that anyone who accepts Christ as the one way to eternal life will be saved. This act of faith is often called being “born again” and is associated with a spiritually, and often more broadly, transformed life. And of course, true to their name, evangelicals believe in the importance of sharing their faith, or evangelizing.<sup>17</sup>

Evangelical Christianity became prevalent throughout villages and cities across the United States during the first Great Awakening. The preacher George Whitefield is sometimes described as the father of American evangelism, and spread his faith throughout the country during the height of this movement in the 1740s. Whitefield, along with other leaders of the Awakening, “stressed traditional themes of human degeneracy and the need to seek God’s mercy if one hoped to escape hell.”<sup>18</sup> These themes were not completely original and unique, but rather, they reflected the Puritan theologies of the original settlers.<sup>19</sup> America’s religiosity was renewed during a second Great Awakening, which occurred in the early nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> While some religious diversity existed throughout and after these movements, there was a wider sense of cultural hegemony and unity throughout America, and the “city upon a hill”

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<sup>16</sup> Sally Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

mentality continued to be prevalent and widely accepted. Protestants controlled most churches and many universities across the country.<sup>21</sup>

This dynamic changed as the United States modernized and industrialized in the early twentieth century. New groups of immigrants from varying faith traditions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism) arrived and settled, and the religious landscape of America became much more varied and diverse. Then, the violence and bloodshed of the First World War (1914-1918) caused several theologians to form new, divergent beliefs about God and the divine. Many Americans became disillusioned, and abandoned the once prevalent idea that the country could be a perfect Christian example for the entire world.<sup>22</sup> Another important cultural shift of this time period was linguistic: “the language of scientific modernism largely replaced the language of a Protestant world view in both the academy and popular imagination.”<sup>23</sup>

Three major strands of Christianity emerged out of the early twentieth century. The first one reconciled with the changing times by adopting “the language and world view of scientific modernism.”<sup>24</sup> Today, this type of Protestantism is often called “mainline” or “liberal.” Generally speaking, these Christians believe the Bible to be “a product of human history” and see its “supernatural claims” as “allegory, spiritual truth or mythology.”<sup>25</sup> While earlier evangelical Christians emphasized salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, these Christians emphasized good works and social reform. Today, unlike many conservative Christians, these people tend to not place importance on public confessions or testimonials of faith.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), xv.

<sup>26</sup> Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 12.

The second major type of Christianity is commonly known as “fundamentalism.” In contrast to mainline Christianity, fundamentalism “repudiated the moral relativism, naturalism, and high critical methods of biblical interpretation.”<sup>27</sup> The term “fundamentalism” originates from a series of twelve booklets called “The Fundamentals” published between 1910-1915, which laid out what its authors understood to be the essential Christian beliefs.<sup>28</sup> The fundamentalists of this period believed that the end of days were near, and that a time was coming when the faithful and godly would be brought to heaven, and sinners would remain on earth for a period of turmoil and suffering.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to mainline Protestants, these Christians generally “viewed social science and social activism as forms of compromise and accommodation to the world.”<sup>30</sup> They shared some things in common with the evangelicals of the Great Awakenings: they emphasized that the Bible was the absolute, literal word of God, set up their own schools and published their own literature.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, “Pentacostalism” also gained prominence at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This movement took off in the Los Angeles area at Bethel Bible School, when a student, Agnes Ozman, apparently began “speaking in the Chinese language” while “a halo seemed to surround her face.”<sup>32</sup> Mainline Protestants and fundamentalists of the time generally viewed “speaking in tongues” as heresy or “satanic gibberish.”<sup>33</sup> However, the founder of the school, Charles Parham, believed that Ozman was being “baptized with the holy ghost.”<sup>34</sup> This event inspired revivals around Los Angeles, and subsequently

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<sup>27</sup> Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*,

Pentecostalism began to take prominence around the United States.<sup>35</sup> Pentecostals understand the practice of speaking in tongues through a story in the Book of Acts about the day of Pentecost, when “the disciples were overwhelmed by the power of the Spirit and began to speak boldly about Jesus in previously unlearned languages to an international crowd gathered in Jerusalem.”<sup>36</sup> R. Marie Griffith writes that this kind of Christianity “spread rapidly among black and white believers around the country, as its prophetic message and experiential, ecstatic style of worship attracted converts from diverse sectors of urban and rural society.”<sup>37</sup> This movement, which is also known as “charismatic” also emphasized prophecy, healing and spirit-filled worship.<sup>38</sup> Even with the popularity of Pentecostalism, mainline Protestantism continued to be the dominant form of Christianity throughout the United States.

The Scopes trial of 1925 highlighted the conflicts between “modern” and secular America and the more conservative sects of Christians in the country.<sup>39</sup> In this trial, Clarence Darrow, a lawyer from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sought to defend John Scopes, a teacher who illegally taught evolution in a Tennessee school.<sup>40</sup> William Jennings Bryan acted as prosecutor for the state of Tennessee, and argued that schools should only teach the Biblical account of creation. In the end, Bryan won the trial, but he was famously humiliated as he testified on its last day. For over two hours, Darrow questioned Bryan about various technicalities in the Bible, and in the end, “led Bryan six times to say that he did not think the six ‘days’ of creation were ‘necessarily’

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(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 91, quoted in Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 207, (footnote).

<sup>37</sup> Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 76.

<sup>39</sup> Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 65, 63.



twenty-four hour days.”<sup>41</sup> The media frenzy around the case stigmatized and alienated fundamentalists and other Christians who took the Bible literally rather than adapting to the scientific beliefs and new language of the time.<sup>42</sup> Thus, these Christians retreated and withdrew from the mainstream. They stopped being deeply involved in politics, but rather, remained somewhat secluded within their own churches and educational institutions.

Years later, two hundred conservative Christian leaders who were dissatisfied with this isolationism met at the 1942 National Conference for United Action among Evangelicals.<sup>43</sup> These men called themselves “neo-evangelicals” to distinguish themselves from the stigmatized “fundamentalists” who had been outcast and humiliated a generation ago. Some of these men would go on to gain national fame and recognition, such as Billy Graham and Charles Fuller.<sup>44</sup> These Christians committed to “a high view of Biblical authority” and vowed to exert more influence in “government, science, education and the arts.”<sup>45</sup> In the following years, there were more evangelical revivals, new churches, and new Christian universities. The neo-evangelicals fought for “a renewed emphasis on evangelism, a revitalized engagement with the ideas of contemporary society, and a return to social and political activism.”<sup>46</sup>

As this movement started in the 1940s, new liberal movements for civil rights, feminism and sexual liberation also began to emerge on the American landscape. However, the neo-evangelicals did not shrink away from the political sphere. Rather, in the second half of the twentieth century, new Christian organizations began to form and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>43</sup> Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 8.

gain significant membership. A small group of Christians who called themselves “Reconstructionists” published literature that encouraged Christians to establish the kingdom of God on earth so that Christ would return.<sup>47</sup> The most famous of the Reconstructionists, Rousas John Rushdoony, wrote a book called *Institutes of Biblical Law*, which outlined a vision for a society where there would be no federal states, only local governments, and “Old Testament Law would be reinstated.”<sup>48</sup> Though few people identify as “Reconstructionist” today, Rushdooney had a powerful influence on conservative Christianities. The idea of the “Christian Nation” which had been less popular since the decades of Scopes Trial, rose to prominence once again.<sup>49</sup>

While different types of conservative Christians—fundamentalists, evangelicals, pentecostals—had often been suspicious and distrusting of one another, many of them were influenced by Rushdooney’s texts and ideas. As progressive movements took shape and gained power, these Christians began to exert a more united force in the public sphere.<sup>50</sup> Then, in 1979, preacher Jerry Falwell founded an organization called the “Moral Majority,” and attempted to “capture the diffuse experiences and beliefs of conservative Christians under one umbrella.”<sup>51</sup> Though these varying kinds of Christians had divergent forms of theology and different ways of worshipping, they agreed on a platform that opposed feminism, abortion, the equal rights amendment, gay liberation, pornography, comprehensive sex education and evolution.<sup>52</sup> Other Christian organizations (such as Concerned Women for America, the Christian Coalition and

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<sup>47</sup> Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 246-247.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>49</sup> I came to realize the importance of the Reconstructionists while attending a lecture by Julie Ingersoll, titled “Christian Reconstructionists (Gendered) Family Model and the Future of the Christian Right,” (Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, April 2, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 194.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

Focus on the Family) emerged through the 1970s and 1980s, and continue to be powerful and influential to this day.<sup>53</sup> These groups, and the constituencies that go along with them, are often referred to as “the Christian Right.”<sup>54</sup>

Though the brief history that I outline here may appear to present an increasingly polarized country, there was not necessarily a strict dichotomy between the left and those on the right. During the “Jesus movement” of the 1970s, conservative pastors began to actively reach out to hippies and other members of counter-cultural movements.<sup>55</sup> One charismatic preacher, Chuck Smith became disappointed in his own church, and set up a small, non-denominational congregation called Calvary Chapel in Venice Beach. Smith also created a house and support center where drug users were supposed to stop using and find Christ. Smith’s programs were widely successful, and his followers began to start Calvary Chapels in their own communities, and soon, there were six hundred across the United States. Calvary Chapels practiced Christianity in a way that resonated with the young people of the time: Erzen writes that “mass baptismal services in the ocean, exuberant prayer meetings, long-haired evangelists and Christian rock musicians contributed to the growth of the Jesus movement in other

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<sup>53</sup> Though these organizations are often grouped together, each one of them has a distinct and slightly different platform. Concerned Women for America describes itself as “the nation’s largest public policy women’s organization with a rich 29-year history of helping our members across the country bring Biblical principles into all levels of public policy.” Focus on the Family declares its mission “to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possibly by nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide.” The Christian Coalition calls itself “the largest conservative grassroots political organization” which “offers people of faith the vehicle to be actively involved in impacting the issues they care about—from the county courthouse to the halls of congress.” See: “About CWA,” *Concerned Women for America*, <http://www.cwfa.org/about.asp> (accessed April 10, 2009); “About Focus on the Family,” *Focus on the Family*, [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx) (accessed April 10, 2009); “About Us” *The Christian Coalition*, [http://www.cc.org/about\\_us](http://www.cc.org/about_us) (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> I use quotations here to indicate that this is a problematic term. The “Christian Right” is often portrayed as a monolithic, when it is in fact made up of diverse bodies of congregations, individuals and political groups.

<sup>55</sup> Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 24.

cities.”<sup>56</sup> Other non-denominational churches, such as the Vineyard Fellowship, also sprung out of the Jesus movement. While these churches drew on youth movements, and had members from counter-cultural communities, they generally held conservative beliefs similar to the platform of Falwell’s Moral Majority. In addition, these churches developed programs that catered to nearly all aspects of a person’s life. Members of a Calvary Chapel or a Vineyard Fellowship “could and still can attend services every day of the week, multiple services on Sunday, Bible studies, and groups for men, women, singles, teens addicts, or single parents.”<sup>57</sup> The larger non-denominational churches that offer such services are sometimes called “megachurches.”

“Evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” “charismatic” and even “non-denominational” are all loaded terms with complex histories and meanings. Today, these words are often used interchangeably. I saw influences from the varying strands of Christian movements in each of the groups that I researched. Today, many prominent conservative Christian leaders openly self-identify using some of these terms. However, when I asked my informants if they would call themselves “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” or “born-again” many of them hesitated to take on a label. As the woman whose quote begins this chapter put it, “I would say that I’m a Christian and leave it there.” This woman, and other women with similar responses, probably had variety of different reasons for rejecting these various Christian categories.<sup>58</sup> For instance, “fundamentalist” is now used to speak not only about Christians, but about Islamists and orthodox Jews. “Fundamentalists” are often dismissed as crazy, out-of-

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>58</sup> Another interesting study would be to look at why these women hesitate to take on a label. Since my project was mostly about gender and sexuality, I did not focus on probing my informants about how they understand the categories around religious identity. There is something political in choosing to only use the label “Christian.” This assertion implies that the speaker has found and is practicing the one “true” form of the religion.

touch or irrational. This problematic label does not acknowledge that the beliefs and lifestyles of these individuals emerge from complex social, political and economic contexts. “Evangelical” has started to take on a similar derogatory nature, as it is often used interchangeably with “fundamentalist.”

In this thesis, I hesitate to use a blanket adjective such as “evangelical” to describe all the women that I interviewed, especially when many of them expressed discomfort with the term. Many of the women, specifically the ones at the Prayer House for Christ, were deeply influenced by Pentecostal or fundamentalist Christianities. However, it would be problematic to use merely the label “Christian” to describe these women, as this thesis is not about all Christian women from all political alignments. Rather, it is specifically about Christian women who are also politically conservative, and thus, throughout this thesis I will use the term “conservative Christian.” Unfortunately, my research period did not allow me to research Catholic or Mormon women; thus, in this work “conservative Christian” only refers to women whose practices and beliefs emerge from Protestant traditions.

The women I interviewed for this project came from a variety of backgrounds, which I will discuss more in the methods section and throughout this paper. However, they did share some political and religious beliefs. They held viewpoints that align with all or most of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority platform. Most of them emphasized that they believed most strongly in the “pro-life” and “pro-family” agendas. A few of them were especially passionate about preserving the state of Israel. In general, they believed that sex should only happen within a heterosexual marriage framework, and thought that women had been divinely designed to be mothers. While some were open to considering the beliefs of other religions, many indicated that they believed that faith in

Jesus Christ was the only way to salvation and eternal life. They told stories about the moments in their lives when they had been “saved” and accepted Jesus as their redeemer. Some of them spoke in tongues and engaged in spirit-filled prayer, while others had alternate methods of worship. To varying degrees, they believed that the Bible was the absolute word of God, and the sacred text had only one unique truthful interpretation. The women I interviewed were also vocal about their religious affiliation in some way. They performed public displays of their beliefs, either on the street, in the halls of Washington, or in strip clubs in the American Southwest. In addition, they often encouraged others (including me) to adopt their particular belief system.

#### *Definitions of Power, Gender, Sexuality*

The last section showed that conservative Christian movements have split, splintered and evolved throughout American history. These breaks have created a variety of words for the diverse kinds of Christians. Similarly, various ruptures throughout academia and popular culture have created a variety of meanings for words pertaining to sexuality, power and gender. Before analyzing the stories and experiences of conservative Christian women, I want to briefly outline some of the particular ways that I will use some of these words throughout this thesis.

First, the precise meaning of the term “agency” is widely contested within feminist scholarship. For some, “agency” is resistance to structures of patriarchy. For others, agency is the ability and will to act within a specific context. I will explore some of the debates and scholarship around this term in chapter three, drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood and R. Marie Griffith. However, in the mean time, I define the term as the ability of an individual to act in order to take control of her life

and mold her destiny. Individuals may use agency to resist societal systems and structures or to uphold and take part in them. As a woman finds empowerment, she can also find more agency, along with more emotional, social or spiritual strength.

Other recurring themes throughout this thesis include “power” and “authority.”

I draw on Foucault’s definition of “power” which he articulates as:

The multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.<sup>59</sup>

For Foucault, power is not merely top-down system of subjugation that stems from greater political and social structures. Rather, power is present in every moment of human contact: power manifests itself in “force relations” that cause the current circumstances to reproduce, shift or change completely. An individual with agency can participate in the web of power relations and impact this process. In this thesis, “authority,” on the other hand, is not the same as power. A woman who has “authority” has an official recognized and respected position in a social hierarchy. While a person with “authority” often times has agency to produce shifts of power she also may not. Circumstances could or could not shift to the will or desires of an individual with authority; rather, others must recognize her authority and realize her will. In this thesis, I try to look beyond merely regarding Christian women as the victims of “top-down” political structures of authority. Rather, I examine the ways that individual women

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92-93.

interpret and enact gender on the grassroots, and participate in confronting it, transforming it and at times revising it and reversing it.

In addition to issues of power, most of this thesis addresses issues of gender. I use the term “sex” when referencing the biological, physical parts of a human. On the other hand, “gender” concerns the social roles inscribed on top of these parts, or “the cultural marking of biological sex.”<sup>60</sup> Gayle Rubin defines a “sex/gender system” as “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity.”<sup>61</sup> Like many other students of anthropology, I reject the notion that gender is biologically determined and dependent on sex. This notion is widely accepted within scholarship today. Judith Butler developed this point further, hypothesizing that gender is not inborn or innate, but “performative” and a product of social life and culture. According to Butler, gender is “manufactured through a sustained set of acts, positioned through the gendered stylization of the body.”<sup>62</sup> People are not born with one gender or another, but rather, through living in society, they learn how to behave and enact the roles of “man” or “woman.” I will continue to discuss and engage Butler’s work throughout this thesis.

Along with gender, much of this thesis addresses questions of sex and sexuality. These terms also have multiplicities of definitions, and “the ability to take many guises and forms.”<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey Weeks points out that the term “sex” “refers to both an act and to a

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<sup>60</sup> Carole S. Vance, “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance, (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayla R. Reiter, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 159.

<sup>62</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxi.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, (New York: Ellis Horwood, 1986), 11.



category of person, to a practice and to a gender.”<sup>64</sup> Sexuality, or the abstract noun that refers to being “sexual” also has a variety of meanings. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines “sex” as “the sum of the structural, functional, and behavioral characteristics of organisms that are involved in reproduction marked by the union of gametes and that distinguish males and females.”<sup>65</sup> I shall use a broader definition for this thesis. Sex does entail acts and “behavior” but this behavior is not limited to “the union of gametes” nor is it limited to acts between “males and females.” In this thesis, I approach sexuality from the perspective of Weeks, that is, I regard the categories of sexuality not as inherently “natural” but rather, as “a product of social and historical forces.”<sup>66</sup> Enactments of sexuality are central parts of relational webs of power, which “reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others.”<sup>67</sup>

Sexuality is central in chapter four, which discusses the Ladies of the Lord, a ministry that performs outreach to women who work in the sex industry. The group does most of its work in strip clubs, that is, venues where women dance and take off their clothes for wages or tips. In addition, many members of the group had formally worked as escorts, and some had engaged in commercial or transactional sex. Throughout this chapter, I have chosen to use the term “sex worker” to refer to the women who work in the sex industry. I avoid terms like “prostitute” and “whore” which imply that the profession is sin, an identity, or a “social or a psychological characteristic

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>65</sup> “Sex,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sex1> (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Weeks, *Sexuality*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of Sexuality” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 309.

of women.”<sup>68</sup> In contrast, sex work is an “income-generating activity or form of labor for men and women.”<sup>69</sup> The term sex worker “emphasizes flexibility and variability of sexual labor as well as its similarities with other dimensions of working people’s lives.”<sup>70</sup> “Sex work” encompasses a variety of commercial acts involving sexual behavior, such as dancing, posing and performing in pornographic photos or videos, completing sexual favors for money, and or working for a sexual phone service.

Several organizations and non-profits, such as the Sex Worker’s Outreach Project (SWOP) also commonly use the word “sex worker.” In general, these organizations oppose the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work and argue that the sex industry needs to be regulated in order to prevent exploitation of its workers. SWOP wants to decriminalize “prostitution” in California, because they believe that this will help better their goal of “ending violence and stigma” for sex workers.<sup>71</sup> The Ladies of the Lord rarely used the term “sex worker” and instead employed words such as “exotic dancer,” “stripper,” “prostitute” and “escort.” While they emphasized that they take a “non-judgmental” approach when working with women, they also tended to demonize the sex industry as a whole. Advocates from organizations like SWOP take a “non-judgmental” attitude towards not just the workers, but towards the work itself. I will continue to engage these terms and explore some of these issues in chapter four.

Finally, in this thesis, for lack of better terms, I also make many references to “traditional” viewpoints on gender and sexuality as opposed to “feminist” or “modern” ones. These definitions of these terms are vague, indistinct and widely contested. I did

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<sup>68</sup> Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> “SWOP USA: Sex Worker’s Outreach Project,” *Sex Workers Outreach Project*, 2009, <http://www.swopusa.org/drupal/index.php?q=> (accessed March 14, 2009).

not directly ask my informants to define what a “traditional” role meant; but their varying understandings of “tradition” were evident throughout interviews. To reflect the contested nature of these terms, I will use quotations around them for the rest of this thesis. Despite my feminist background and progressive political commitments, I attempt not to privilege one of these roles over the other. I define a “traditional” role as I believe my informants would. A woman is in this role when she is married and concerns herself mostly with issues of the household, rather than occupying a larger role in the public sphere. A woman within a “traditional” marital relationship may have a mutual, respectful partnership with her husband, but she yields to him while making large, important lifestyle decisions. A woman who fully conforms to the “traditional” role has not had sex before marriage, and does not have sex outside of a heterosexual marital relationship. On the other hand, a woman in a “non-traditional” or “modern” role may or may not have a husband, partner or family. If she does, she may work outside the home, make many household decisions, and regard her romantic relationship as partnership. She has not necessarily waited for marriage to engage in sexual activity, nor does she necessarily limit herself to one partner within marriage.

I recognize that many of these definitions are dangerously simplistic, and do not do justice to the experiences of millions of women around the world whose lifestyles might be similarly outlined above. I am apprehensive about naming one set of roles “traditional” as to do so is to privilege them and imply that these particular roles have naturally existed throughout history and around the globe. Gender roles vary across cultural and historical contexts. It may seem like I present a binary between “traditional” and “modern,” but I recognize that it is too simplistic to divide all experiences of women into one of these categories or the other. There are women who

spend most of the time in the domestic sphere but have an important impact on society, and vice-versa. There are women who may appear to live out a “modern” role with a male or female partner, but do not necessarily feel liberated or fulfilled. Through I start with these definitions, it is my intention to flesh them out, complicate them, and show the complexities and intricacies of the lives of certain conservative Christian women.

### *Previous Studies of Conservative Christian Women*

Numerous ethnographers have taken on similar projects and conducted ethnographic work with Christian women in order to understand their worldviews, agency and views on gender. Many anthropologists and sociologists are still responding to the work of R. Marie Griffith, who spent two years studying the interdenominational and charismatic Women’s Aglow Fellowship in the 1990s.<sup>72</sup> The women of Aglow meet in chapters around the country to pray, worship and support one another. In her research, Griffith found that Aglow women were embracing traditional roles, as many of them “rejected feminism in favor of a theology enjoining female submission to male authority.”<sup>73</sup> However, Griffith also found that women in Aglow communities were remolding “submission” to create empowerment, happiness and purpose for themselves.

Many of the women Griffith interviewed came from troubled families, or had experienced trauma from rape, mental illness or abuse. For instance, in one chapter, Griffith tells the story of “Dorothy,” a woman who faced depression and began “obsessing over her husband’s death” even though he was still alive.<sup>74</sup> Dorothy became unhappy and anti-social, withdrawing from the world to think about her husband’s

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<sup>72</sup> Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

funeral. Finally, overcome by guilt, Dorothy confessed her “mental illness” to a friend, who told her to renounce Satan and surrender and submit to the Lord. In doing so, “Dorothy felt herself to be healed from her terrible sickness and to be living a new life of joyous certainty and peace.”<sup>75</sup> In this example, Dorothy used submission to take control of her life, overcome her unhappy emotional state, and find peace. Griffith’s findings upset certain views about conservative Christianity: namely, the belief that strong faith leaves women oppressed and unhappy. This work helps demonstrate that feminists cannot just label conservative Christianities as “oppressive” but look into the personal, meaningful effects they have for individual women.

Brenda Brasher also disrupts stereotypes about Christian women in her work *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*. Brasher spent six months doing field work in two different American “fundamentalist” congregations. Brasher’s work confirms some commonly held beliefs about the so-called “Religious Right.” For instance, Brasher notes that women from these congregations were often excluded from positions of authority within the church.<sup>76</sup> She finds that the churches were split into two worlds: “a general symbolic world led by men that encompasses overall congregational life” and “a female symbolic world composed of and led solely by women.”<sup>77</sup> While the pastors were men who lead central activities like Sunday worship, women enjoyed various support groups that they lead and controlled themselves. Some feminists might argue that such separation between the sexes indicates that women are viewed as second-class citizens within those communities.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>76</sup> Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*, 12-13.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 5.

However, Brasher argues otherwise, contending that women's groups within parishes "encourage the development of female enclaves, intimate social networks of women that also empower women by functioning as a material and spiritual resource for female fundamentalists in distress."<sup>78</sup> Brasher's work indicates that women in conservative Christian contexts can find community, power and support within all-female settings. Her findings, though not as intricate, detailed or nuanced as Griffith's, suggest some possible reasons why women are drawn to a movement that may seem to oppress them.

Julie Ingersoll responds to both Brasher and Griffith in her work *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories and Gender Battles*. Ingersoll insists that her work is not "a feminist critique from outside the tradition" but says that she "seeks to go beyond current work" that theorizes that women find empowerment in set gender roles and submission.<sup>79</sup> Instead, she documents "women who challenge gender norms within their religious traditions" and "the fallout they experience as part of the ensuing conflict."<sup>80</sup> Ingersoll interviewed evangelical women across the country who sought to challenge established roles for women within their communities. Nearly all the women she spoke to experienced dramatic social isolation or belittlement as they defied "traditional" norms.

For example, Ingersoll spoke to one woman who broke "traditional" gender roles when she became a professor at a Christian college. This woman routinely experienced sexist remarks from male students who felt that women were not fit to be faculty members. The informant told her that, "A lot of guys just avoided my classes.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>79</sup> Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 1-2.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 2.

They would say, ‘Who would want to take a theology course taught by a woman, anyway?’”<sup>81</sup> Ingersoll suggests that there are more struggles about gender within the conservative Christian communities than Brasher and Griffith found. Ingersoll finds that gender roles in these communities were not fixed, but rather, there are constant negotiations occurring over the “proper” places for men and women. Her findings demonstrate that conservative Christian movements are not static in their beliefs on gender, but women are constantly negotiating and remolding their own roles. According to her, not all Christian women feel empowered by set gender positions within their communities of faith.

Finally, sociologist Sally K. Gallagher examines the scope of conservative Christianity across the United States. She found it noteworthy that women from her group of interest have similar employment rates, incomes and education as the greater American population, while they go to “church more frequently, give more money and time to religious and volunteer associations, and...talk about gender and family in ways that appear baldly patriarchal in contrast to the normative egalitarianism of the broader culture.”<sup>82</sup> She argues that “evangelicals” draw on a complex theoretical “tool kit” while articulating their ideas and confronting the world around them. She argues that the “evangelical tool kit” contains both “egalitarian” and “gender-essentialist” tools, and that women draw multiple tools while they act in diverse contexts. In addition, she assumes, like many sociologists, that evangelical Christianity is essentially a “social structure.” Gallagher draws on the theories of William Sewell, who theorizes such structures “tend to reproduce themselves” over time.<sup>83</sup> Because humans are prone to make errors and

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>82</sup> Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 15.

have new ideas and insights, social structures may shift and change as they reproduce. “The actions of actors” Gallagher argues, “may bring about change.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, as “evangelical Christians” enact the religious traditions and the standards of gender that they have been taught, they are also prone to change them or modify them depending on their particular circumstances.

In a way, my findings are also similar to the work of Griffith and Brasher, as I argue that many conservative Christian women feel excited and empowered by their faith, even if from the outside it seems that faith disempowers them. However, like Ingersoll, I discuss women who are not necessarily conforming to established gender roles within their tradition. Some of these women do not stay at home to make dinner, but protest in public or lobby congress members on particular issues. Others do not avoid addressing issues of sexuality, but perform ministry outreach where they regularly interact with sex workers and visit strip clubs. These women are carving out unique places for themselves within the conservative Christian world, where they can be influential leaders of men and women, and agents of change. All of them reproduce and reenact the protestant faith tradition, and its standards for gender and sexuality, in slightly different ways.

However, throughout my research, I did not find that these women experienced the “fallout” or harsh conflict that Ingersoll described. Perhaps this is because my own research period was short compared to those of these scholars who took years to complete their doctoral work. I did find, however, that within different spheres of the conservative Christian world, women make some room to negotiate and question gender roles. The women in each community used various tools of divine fluidity to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 15.



create flexibility or fluidity within the frameworks of their own traditions. At times, the lines between “men” and “women” could shift, blur or even break without harsh fallout or conflict. A deeper look at the situation of individual communities of conservative Christian women may explain what appears to be a “paradox” from the outside.

### *Methodology for this Project*

To take this deeper look, I draw on ethnographic work from two different research periods. The first serious amount of data was collected over a period of ten weeks throughout the summer of 2008.<sup>85</sup> I spent time in Washington, DC to conduct participant observation at conservative Christian protests, prayer meetings, services and offices. During this period, I formally interviewed a total of thirteen politically active conservative Christian women, with eight follow-up interviews. All interviews were conducted in person, except for two, which were conducted over the phone. I recorded the in-person interviews with an iTalk recorder (except for one woman who refused to do so) and took notes on my laptop during phone interviews.

The women in Washington were from a number of different geographical locations, including California, Texas, Tennessee and Kansas. They belonged to an assortment of churches, most of which were non-denominational. The majority of these women were white, (though a few were Asian American) and they ranged in age from eighteen to their late forties. In addition to the formal interviews, I informally interviewed approximately fifteen other Christians of both genders, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty five. The field notes and interview experts for chapters two and four come from this period, unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>85</sup> The Pomona College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the methods for the summer portion of this research project, and assigned it IRB number 05072008SB-CS4.

Even though I only worked in one city, I spoke to two distinct communities during the summer research period: women who hold influential jobs in powerful offices, as well as women who are grassroots prayer activists and intercessors.<sup>86</sup> I entered each interview with a set of fixed questions, but generally let the women lead the conversation with topics that were of interest to them.<sup>87</sup> After briefing each woman on my project and its purpose, I obtained their informed consent to use pieces of the interviews in my final paper.<sup>88</sup> I asked each woman to tell me about her faith tradition, how she had found it and why it was important to her. The women told me the stories of how they got to Washington, explained their motivations for activism and their hopes for the future. I also asked about their views and beliefs on gender, sex and feminism. Depending on the interests of each woman, we also talked about more specific issues, including abortion, sex education, gay rights and Israel. Interviews generally lasted between thirty minutes and two hours. When possible, I returned to speak to interviewees a second time.

Most of the grassroots activists whom I interviewed came from a community at a small center for worship that I will call the Prayer House for Christ (PHC). A preacher from the Midwest founded PHC several years ago, at a location in downtown

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<sup>86</sup> The women I interviewed often described themselves as “intercessors.” I will explain this term in chapter 5.

<sup>87</sup> See appendix for a list of sample questions.

<sup>88</sup> To obtain informed consent from an informant, I asked for her signature on a document that explained the project as such: “You are invited to take part in a research project conducted by Sarah Burgess of Pomona College. The purpose of this study is to better understand politically active Christian women, and their views on women’s rights. ....In the course of this study, you will be asked a few questions regarding your political views, your views on the rights of women and your religious beliefs. There are no anticipated negative effects that will result from participation in this study. The interview will last between twenty minutes and one hour. You will not receive compensation for participation in this study. If you do not want to answer any of the questions or feel uncomfortable at any time, you are free to withdraw from this study. You can also refuse to answer any questions during the interview. All information gathered will remain confidential. If you wish, you may remain anonymous in the final research report.”

Washington. PHC housed several national Christian organizations with chapters in DC, such as the pro-life mission group that I call Missions for Christ (MC). PHC had small offices for each of these organizations, as well as an arrow-shaped prayer room that pointed towards the Supreme Court.<sup>89</sup> There was a core group of about thirty-five people who were at PHC for long-term periods. In addition, PHC hosted visiting groups from churches around the country, who journeyed to Washington for a few days to pray. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, someone affiliated with PHC would stand in a spot in downtown Washington and pray that abortion would end and revival will come back to America. In addition, there was always someone praying inside the PHC prayer room. If no one was available to pray in the prayer room, the group streamed live video from a 24-hour prayer center in the Midwest on a large screen. The PHC held energetic, daily group prayer meetings (also called “prayer rumbles”) in the evening from seven to nine o’clock.<sup>90</sup> I met women from the PHC by approaching them as they stood in public to pray, and by attending some of their prayer meetings.

The PHC was an interesting example of grassroots activity, but I also wanted to learn more about professional Christian women who worked in powerful, well-funded offices. I interviewed women who had done work at four different organizations, as well as a woman who does foreign policy work for a Republican representative in Congress. I tried several methods when contacting professional women, but not all of them were successful. I browsed web pages looking for people who fit my criteria, and then called or e-mailed to request an interview, and explain my project and its goals. Later, when I

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<sup>89</sup> PHC has closed and moved since I did this research, and is now in another location that is possibly different than this one.

<sup>90</sup> The men and women of PHC also called their meetings “rumbles” probably because of the rowdy, energetic nature of the meetings. Chapter four provides description of these events.

had made a few contacts, interviewees referred me to their friends or colleagues who they thought would be interested in speaking to me.

I continued to do ethnographic research through the winter of 2008 and into the spring of 2009. I wanted to interview conservative Christian women in another part of the country, in order to gain a greater understanding of the scope of the movement and differences within it throughout the United States. I became interested in another apparent paradox among conservative Christian women, who often hold more traditional viewpoints on sexuality. Recently, Christians have become involved with ministries that reach out to sex workers. Often, women must speak openly about sensitive topics and conduct outreach in locations that are regarded as less than “holy.” I became interested in how women involved in such movements understand gender and sexuality.<sup>91</sup>

Most of my data from the Western United States comes from a group that I call the Ladies of the Lord. This group, as I explained earlier, is made up of women who aim to reach out to women working in the sex industry. The Ladies of the Lord is based out of a large non-denominational church which I call the Haven Church. I initially contacted the group over e-mail, and traveled to visit them three times (for between two and four days) to conduct interviews, and attend their Bible studies. I also interviewed a few other women from the Haven Church, and attended a few of their events that are open to the public. On my final visit, I went with some Ladies for the Lord to do outreach in a strip club. Admittedly, my time with this group was much shorter than my research with the groups in Washington, but I continued to correspond with the women over the phone and over e-mail. In total, I formally interviewed eleven women for that

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<sup>91</sup> The Pomona College IRB also approved the methods for this portion of field research, and assigned it IRB number 11132008SB-CS4.

chapter. Six were members of the Ladies ministry, and two were members of the Haven Church. Finally, one interview was with a woman who identifies as a “born again” Christian and works as a sex worker in another city. Two women ran separate faith-based ministries for women in the sex industry (one of whom was actually based on the East Coast). While most of these interviews were conducted in person, three took place over the phone.<sup>92</sup>

Although I enjoyed most of the interviews in Washington and on the West Coast, at times, at times the work was challenging and difficult. I have never spent so much time among people who had such different worldviews than my own. Most sensed that I did not share their political or religious beliefs. Indeed, my own set of beliefs is quite different than that of the women I interviewed. I grew up in a liberal Episcopalian church, and I have spent the past year wondering in and out of Quaker and Unitarian services, pondering if a God exists, reading the horoscopes and doing tarot readings for my friends. When women asked me about my faith, I said that I grew up going to a church with my family every week, but was currently exploring different faith traditions to find the one that was right for me. Even though I was not theologically on the same page as many of the women, there was still some room to connect while sharing beliefs about faith. On occasion, if they asked, I would share my favorite book of the Bible (Job) as well as the time I felt most in touch with the ineffable and unknown (midnight riding on an overnight train).

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<sup>92</sup> I also obtained informed consent from these informants (except in one exceptional case when an interview took place in a car, and I explained the project orally and received consent verbally). The informed consent form was nearly identical to the one used for summer research, but explained the goal of the project as such: “to better understand politically and socially active Christian women, and their views on sexuality and the roles of women.”

In addition, a few women also asked me about my own political beliefs. I was constantly trying to gauge how much I should share, and revealed different parts of my identity and ideas depending on the context. In Washington, abortion was the most important issue for most women I interviewed. When women asked me if I was pro-choice or pro-life, I borrowed a term that I found in Faye Ginsburg's *Contested Lives*, "pro-dialogue."<sup>93</sup> I used this term to identify myself, and added that I believed abortion was a complicated issue, and I was interested in speaking to women from all different viewpoints. On the West Coast, I felt more comfortable sharing my political affiliations with the Ladies of the Lord and even revealed to a few of them that I had voted for Barack Obama.

When I attended services or prayer meetings at various churches, I participated as much as I felt comfortable doing so: I sang along with songs, but I never put up my hands while praying or spoke in tongues (this gesture was common at PHC). I believe that most people saw me as a Christian, but one who still needed to be saved and had not yet *really* received Jesus into her heart. In Washington, several women prayed over me when the interviews were over. At a PHC prayer meeting one night, one young man put his hands on my shoulders, looked me in the eyes said that God had told him to tell me that "He" had sent me there to conduct this project. Another women ended our interviews with a prayer for me, such as this one, which I recorded on tape:

God, I just ask that you would bring clarity of thought to Sarah as she does this project. Abba, abba father, that you would show her how personally you have knit her together in her mother's womb. How you have been calling her before she was even born. That your heart is towards her. And that as she seeks you, she will find you. God, I just ask that this whole project would be a huge taste test of the kingdom of God. That she will hunger and search for more. Hunger and search for righteousness. Hunger and search to know you. God, you are so awesome. I just ask that you make yourself known to Sarah. In Jesus name. Amen.

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<sup>93</sup> Ginsburg, *Contested Lives*, 222.

This prayer highlights some of the tension between the way I saw my project and the way my many of my interviewees saw it. While I approached my research mainly as an academic task for my senior thesis, many (though not all) of my informants indicated that they believed God had personally given me this project so that I might find “Him.”

In general, I was not annoyed by these attempts to rouse my faith, though at times, especially at PHC, I did feel like I was disappointing my interviewees by not converting. I wondered if I was “leading them on” by continually expressing interest in their faith, while knowing that I would probably never convert myself. My informant’s own commitments to evangelism may have helped my research, as I imagine that some people agreed to speak to me with hopes that I would turn closer to God.

Although I approached the project from an academic standpoint, I did end up experiencing some personal spiritual growth. The prayers of my interviewees did not change me into a conservative Christian, but they did occasionally move me, and offered me a chance to reflect and think about my own beliefs. In the moments while someone prayed over me, or while I waited for an interviewee who was running late, I came to realize that my own faith did in fact inform my work. I believe that there is something of God in every person-- something ineffable, unphysical and unnamable. To communicate with a person, then, and to conduct a good, honest, truthful interview is a sort of spiritual act where the ethnographer has a chance to get a glimpse of something greater than herself. I do not mean to imply that I am some sort of prophet, or that I regularly interact with the divine throughout my research. But, I want to be upfront about my own bias and methods. Perhaps this belief made me slightly bias towards the

people I studied. However, I hope that it can make my work richer and more meaningful.

This belief helped me get through the more difficult moments of fieldwork. In my hours of observations and informal interviews, I was constantly assessing when it was appropriate to take notes. Although most people seemed pleased that I was doing a project about Christians, many people were not necessarily comfortable being part of a study. In the middle of July of 2008, I attended a conservative Sunday school class for adults in a Virginian church, hoping to observe and find some potential interviewees. At the beginning of class, the teacher asked the new attendees to introduce themselves. “Hello, I’m Sarah” I said, “I’m a student at Pomona College in California, and I’m writing my thesis about politically active Christian women in DC. Thank you for having me.”

“Welcome Sarah.” The teacher said. Most of the people in the room turned to smile at me, when a man a few seats down from me asked in a loud, half-joking, half-anxious question “are we a part of your study too?”

“Well...” I said, trying to remember the eloquent response to this question. There was a moment of awkward silence, when a woman jumped in: “Don’t, worry, you’re not a woman, she doesn’t care about you!” Everyone laughed, and I had a moment to recall the appropriate response: I would take some notes, but wouldn’t include any identifying characteristics about specific people. At the Ladies of the Lord meetings, I took only very general notes on non-personal matters. The Ladies of the Lord meetings were supposed to be a confidential, and I agreed to respect and honor their group rules for my project.



Eventually, I transcribed all the interviews that were recorded on tape. I coded the interviews collected over the summer of 2008 by hand, and used ATLAS.ti software to code the ones collected from the fall of 2008 through the spring of 2009.<sup>94</sup> As I wrote up drafts for this thesis, I e-mailed and called women to share certain sections of my paper about them, and confirm that I had accurately represented their lives and beliefs. At times, I also shared my greater analysis about gender within conservative Christianity today. Some responses were quite positive; one woman wrote back that she was praying that I would get an “A.” Some women didn’t e-mail or call me back, possibly because they were too busy. A few of them offered clarifications and critiques that were quite helpful, and at times I have included these critiques in this paper. Only once did a woman call me and deny that she said the things that I had recorded. Even though I had her words on tape, I removed the offending lines from my thesis.

I did my best to make sure that I accurately represented the thoughts and beliefs of these women. However, obviously, this is an analytical thesis, and I will use the tools that I have learned at my liberal arts college to analyze and understand what I observed and heard. The women may not agree with every point that I make, but I hope they can see that I tried my hardest to approach this project from a respectful point of view. I learned so much from speaking to these women, and I have a great amount of admiration for their commitment, drive and passion.

I have also made the choice to write the majority of this thesis in the past tense. The present tense is snappier and makes for an easier and more exciting read. However, I do not feel comfortable writing in the present tense because of the constant evolution of the women and places I studied. By the time this thesis is printed, it is possible that

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<sup>94</sup> To “code” is to sort collected data from different informants into various themes. ATLAS.ti is a software that facilitates this process.

many of them will no longer be enacting their particular performances of gender and sexuality. The PHC, which was so alive and vibrant over the summer, had closed when I returned to Washington in January of 2009, and in the spring of 2009, it apparently reopened in another location. Some of the professional women were in the process of leaving their jobs or switching their roles as I drafted this work. The membership at the Ladies of the Lord experienced a fair amount of turnover, and the particular practices of this group may have changed since I left.

Throughout the research, I also had a hard time responding to interactions with my more liberal peers. A few friends asked me if I thought that people were “really” connecting to a higher being when they prayed or spoke in tongues. I cannot pretend to answer that question, nor do I think that it is important or relevant for me to do so in this paper. Rather, my goal for this project was to increase understanding about conservative Christians and the complexities of gender and sexuality in contemporary American society. In the next chapter, I attempt to do this for professional conservative Christian women.

## *II. Power Offices and Protean Selves*

“Have a seat.”

Joan, a top executive at one of the largest conservative Christian organizations in the country, extended her arm like a gracious host, smiled pleasantly, and invited me to sit down on her huge, plush sofa. I took a moment to admire the panoramic view of the city out the tall windows that spanned the length of her office. Her massive desk, covered in papers and reports, sat on the other side of the room, several feet away from her homey meeting area. I wasn't in her office to challenge her views, or to request support from her organization. Despite the framed pictures of adorable children that lined the room, I could not help but feel intimidated. This was a Washington power office, and Joan Watson was an influential, successful, well-supported woman. At the same time, she was a “traditionalist” who believes strongly in a pro-life agenda, separate roles for men and women, and restricting marriage to heterosexual couples.

Several women I interviewed for this project were Christians like Joan who hold prominent jobs in well-established, high-profile conservative offices. Women in this group are especially prone to criticism from liberals and feminists. In reality, politically active women from the so-called Christian Right are much more complicated than flimsy, comical representations of Tina Fey. The ones I met were organized, busy and

extremely dedicated to their causes. These women's experiences and their articulations and beliefs about gender are influenced by their religious beliefs, their backgrounds, and their straddled position between a "traditional" woman's role and "non-traditional" one. They did not believe that women are naturally inferior to men; rather, they expressed and articulated gender in complicated and ambiguous ways. They believed that the home was an ideal place for a woman, yet they were very clearly not at home themselves. They rejected feminism, yet behaved in ways that might be considered feminist. Joan's office reflected this dynamic, as it felt like both a power office and the living room of a comfortable family home.

The complexity of these women's lives could be read as paradox or hypocrisy. Why would a woman who believes so strongly in the homemaker role choose to spend her days in an office on Capital Hill? Why would women reject feminism if they clearly benefited from its messages about women's abilities to perform in the professional world? Instead of labeling these conservative Christian women as "hypocrites" this chapter will examine how their narratives fit in with a larger psychological pattern of contemporary postmodern identity. Today, nearly every person, not merely conservative Christian women, has adopted a multi-faceted, complex identity. Consistency is no longer an option; rather, the postmodern subject is a "protean self." For professional Christian women, this self is the product of several layers of their own experiences: their personal journeys, their political backgrounds, their individual relationships with Jesus Christ and their positions in the American capitalist economy. Though conservative Christianity is often thought to be a rigid movement, these women had cultivated identities that allowed them to negotiate and embody varying roles as they moved through different spheres of society. This was their divine fluidity,

and they understood it in part through their belief in a God who had specific, individual and complex plans for each one of them.

### *Lifton's Theory of Shifting Identity*

Psychologist Robert Lifton first developed the idea of the protean self, and presents it in his 1993 work, The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation. Lifton begins his book with this bold statement:

We are becoming fluid and many-sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time. This mode of being differs radically from that of the past, and enables us to engage in continuous exploration and personal experiment.<sup>95</sup>

Due to modernization, urbanization and industrialization, people face many challenges and life complexities that they have not in the past. Lifton confidently uses the pronoun “we” to include all of humanity, and his book analyzes the identities of humans living in a variety of political and cultural contexts around the world. He began to form his theory of the protean self when conducting research with citizens of Hong Kong in the mid-1950s, who were simultaneously embracing communist and capitalist ideologies.<sup>96</sup>

Today most humans must deal with “unmanageable historical forces and social uncertainties.”<sup>97</sup> Leaders change often, and due to the rapid circulation of people, ideas, goods and services, we have unprecedented access to information about other cultures, ideologies, philosophies and conflicts. In his introduction, Lifton examines just one copy of *The New York Times* and remarks that it presents to a reader a seemingly endless list of conflicts and social, political and economic problems.<sup>98</sup> While the self of the pre-

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Lifton, *The Protean Self, Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, 1.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 4.

industrial era dealt with relatively consistent cultural and political pulls and pushes, today these pulls and pushes are unpredictable and constantly in flux.

Lifton argues that the self is remarkably resilient in these circumstances: it does not collapse or breakdown, but rather, it becomes malleable and fluid. Each human is forced to face so many different kinds of stimuli and contexts that it is impossible for her to maintain a consistent, stable identity. People have learned to rapidly change with circumstances, and behave in different ways in accordance with very diverse contexts. Lifton names his theory for the Greek figure of Proteus, who changes shape from water to boar to tree to serpent.<sup>99</sup> A protean self can quickly embrace various “idea systems” and let them go. Though some might call her a constant “fundamentalist,” Joan embodies a protean self, as a woman who embraces the idea system of the “traditional” family woman while simultaneously leading one of the most powerful Christian interest groups in America. I, too, as a left-leaning feminist reflect the ideals of the protean self. In college, I have written papers critiquing capitalism on the same laptop with which I order books and clothing online. Although I cannot speak for all women or all feminists in this paper, I suspect that many of them also grapple with similar inconsistencies and intricacies in their own lives.

In addition, Lifton argues that the protean women may face even more challenges than their male counterparts. In the United States, many women today must “perform a special form of protean juggling in combining commitments to home, childbirth, nurturing, with occupational and intellectual pursuits.”<sup>100</sup> While playing multiple roles in very different contexts, a woman is forced to develop a complicated personal identity, and take on multiple ways of operating that may come in conflict with

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 9.

one another.

This theory has interesting connections to Butler's ideas of gender and performativity. As mentioned in the introduction, Judith Butler theorized that gender is not innate or inborn, but a repetition of learned, stylized acts. Gender is a performance of identity, and in today's increasingly complex world, these performances must become more and more complicated. Different spaces may require that subjects perform gender differently. In the past, when identity was less complicated, embodying a certain gender might have been relatively simple. However, the protean selves of today must perform gender differently in several divergent contexts, (the home, the office, in public) and must be able to quickly switch performances depending on the situation.

In her book *God Gave Us the Right*, Christel Manning suggests that the protean self model may be helpful for understanding conservative women from Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Jewish backgrounds. In this section, I will build on her work, and examine the narratives of four different high-power conservative Christian women: Joan, introduced at the beginning, Jennifer, a congressional staffer, Dottie, who works at a political Christian group, and Allison, a Christian in a high-level position at a conservative organization. I chose to use the protean self theory in this section because the contrasts in these women's lives seemed most poignant out of all my research groups, and I wanted to explore how they understand these contrasts themselves. Of course, I cannot make any sweeping generalizations about conservative Christian women based on interviews with four people. However, I think that their stories offer valuable insight into the political Christian world. These women all hold a considerable amount of influence and political sway, and in all likelihood their viewpoints reflect the beliefs of other Christian women as well. These women are, like

many Americans, negotiating multiple political, religious and cultural influences that make them who they are today. I will start by showing how their identities encompassed both “traditional” and “modern” ideals of gender, and discuss the different layers of experience that have impacted their identities. I will show how their faith in an omnipotent God impacts their understanding of their own situation, and then argue that their articulations and enactments of gender are distinctly protean.

*Lives in Betwixt and Between*

Each one of the four women had a lifestyle that blended both “traditional” and “modern” conceptions of womanhood. They occupied a liminal space, that is, a space that is between, betwixt or beyond the normative categories of greater society.<sup>101</sup> Though these women all held a significant amount of political authority and social sway, in a way they were on the fringes within their own movements and within greater American society. While they fought to maintain certain familial traditions, their lives did not necessary reflect the ideals of their organizations. They were also liminal in that they work in the Washington political industry, which is dominated in large part by men.

Joan, more than anyone I interviewed, struck me as someone who actively challenges the “docile and domestic” image of a conservative Christian woman. She was in a position of authority and influence as the head of an organization that is one of the nation's largest public policy organizations. Her office concerned itself with several issues including family and the sanctity of life. When I asked Joan how she managed to balance family life while running such a large office, she replied, “I am not married and I

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<sup>101</sup> For a deeper discussion of liminality, see : Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Aldrine Publishing Company: New York, 1967), 94.



don't have children.”<sup>102</sup> As a forty-five year old single woman who lived without a husband or sons and daughters, Joan broke the most basic stereotype that many people hold about conservative Christian women. Her organization listed “family” as one of its most important issues, yet the woman who ran it had not started one herself.

Joan had been asserting herself in the political sphere since she was a young woman. In her early years protesting abortion clinics, Joan told me she “was arrested a total of six times.” In addition, Joan was confident enough to represent herself in court. She proudly told me her first line from her closing argument: “I am a Christian and a citizen, and there's not a conflict between the two.” Clearly, from an early age, Joan had not been a passive subject, but an influential agent of change who was not afraid to be outspoken and opinionated.

As noted in the introduction, if conservative Christian women are given credit for being active, they are often said to be merely the pawns of men. However, Joan told me several stories in which *she* was the one leading action, and directing men around her with initiatives. In the early nineties, she was demonstrating against an abortion clinic in Houston, when an “injunction came down” ordering the pro-life protesters to stay one hundred feet away from the abortion clinic. Joan said she “became indignant” and said to the other protestors, “we need to go down there, we should pray.” One of the men she was working with, “Daniel” wanted to pray outside the injunction zone. In response, Joan said “No! It won't mean anything. We need to go inside the zone.” As a result, Joan and her fellow prayer activists were arrested. Joan reported that the judge sentenced her to six months in jail and a \$500 fine. After this event, the larger Christian

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<sup>102</sup>It is important to note that I relied on the testimonies of each woman while writing this paper. When Joan told me that she was not married, or that she once did pro-life activism in the mid-west, I relied on her to tell me the truth. I did not have the time or the means to fact-check each detail from every woman.

community in Houston mobilized, and sixty pastors went to pray in the spot where Joan had first made her statement. Joan could not say for sure if all the pastors were men (as she was “tied up” when this happened) but she thought that it was very likely that most, if not all of them were.

Here, Joan was the one who wanted to make the stronger, bolder statement, and the other activists, men, followed her in the end. Obviously, I was not there to observe Joan and her community throughout these events, so I cannot confirm that her memories are correct. However, it is significant that Joan recounted the story this way, and was comfortable describing a situation where she was leading and directing the action.

In addition, Joan, as a high-ranking member of her organization, held a position of authority over male staffers. Joan said she did find it difficult to be of a higher rank than her male subordinates. She said she was still in touch with Daniel, who had recently come to her office, trying to convince her that her organization should be involved in the Beijing Olympics. She told me about this incident to demonstrate that in some cases, men are the influential ones pushing her to drive things forward. However, I heard this story differently. Joan called his plan “risky” and it seemed to me like she was the one who had the ability to decide if his idea would come to life.

I attended Joan’s church for a service and Bible study, visited her office twice, and read much of the literature that her organization publishes. In all instances, Joan came off as confident, poised and sure of herself. She raised her hand to answer questions in the Bible study, and she sat up straight as she answered my questions in her office. Yet, she occupied an unusual and even radical space. I hesitate to call her “marginalized” as that term implies a lack of agency, which Joan clearly possesses. Yet,

she was on the margins as she transcended “traditional” gender roles and asserted herself in a political environment dominated by men.

The other women who I interviewed across Washington were in similar positions. Dottie was the chief of staff at an influential Christian organization in Washington. Her office sought to bring Biblical principles to the government, and did so through press conferences, public forums, literature, the Internet, and in-person discussions with important leaders. When I knocked on the door of her office building, she answered it herself, wearing a snazzy green suit.

Dottie, like Joan, was a woman who held both authority and influence. Her organization’s website described her position, noting that she was in charge of their programs and events. As we walked through hallways to her office, she apologized for being so out of breath and explained that she had just returned from having coffee with Karl Rove. Each time I met with her, numerous staffers, men and women, called or stopped by to ask her questions or request her advice. During the first interview, when the third or fourth person came by, Dottie took a deep breath and stood up to shut the door, apologizing to me in a light Southern accent: “I think what happens is, that I work here. I run everything. I can be very busy.” Dottie’s walls had pictures of her shaking hands with influential people, including several Supreme Court justices and president George W. Bush. Her office was crowded with stacks of books and reports.

Like Joan, Dottie also existed in a liminal space between a “traditional” and “modern” role. Although Dottie did not share stories about asserting authority over men, it was clear that she had spent her life not as a compliant follower, but as a leading force within her family and within the political sphere. Dottie told me that at times she had been the main breadwinner and “head of the household” explaining, “I’ve been in

that predicament depending on the economy, and the surroundings around us, how things fall.” Her organization also listed “family” as a priority. Dottie was divorced, and had recently celebrated the birth of a grandchild.

Dottie led at her work while molding legislation and pushing it through Congress. When I asked her about the most important issue for women today, I expected to hear a reply about pornography or abortion. However, the first thing Dottie mentioned was “human trafficking.” She briefly explained her work to me, noting that most people don’t realize trafficking “is happening at your own back door.” The legislation she worked on provided programs for the government to go “in and find these traffickers.” She also promoted laws “prosecuting” them, and “helping the women and the children and the young girls get back into the system.” While working for this cause, Dottie asserts herself over two groups of men. First, her work aims to capture and prosecute the “traffickers” the ones taking the “young girls” out of the “system.” Through this work, she also wants to raise awareness about this issue, teaching the other men and women who “didn’t realize was happening” at their own “back door.” For individuals who are not familiar with the debates and discourses around issues of “human trafficking” (this is a developing issue) Dottie’s ideas on this issue may seem like common sense. However, her particular language and approach to “human trafficking” issue contrasts with other scholars who want to focus on the grander inequalities and circumstances that cause women from developing countries to migrate in ways that are risky or dangerous.<sup>103</sup> Her emphasis on enforcement and prosecution could be

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<sup>103</sup> See Laura M Agustín, “Forget Victimization: Granting Agency to Migrants,” *Development*, 46 no. 3 (2003): 30-36; Wendy Chapkis, “Trafficking, Migration, and the Law: Protecting innocents, Punishing Immigrants,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003): 923-937.

considered more masculine than an activist who wants to combat “human trafficking” by fighting poverty in the developing world.

Although “help out with those bills” might sound passive, Dottie later explained exactly what she does when she wants a bill to pass. She takes part in a complicated, grueling process that involves meeting with members of Congress, talking to staffers, finding interested parties and supporters. After passing a bill on one side of congress, Dottie and her staff have to work on the other. She explained “there are many meetings on the hill that strategically come together.” Although Dottie didn’t mention moments like Joan when she explicitly directed and influenced men, it is easy to conclude that throughout this kind of work she must. Most of congress is made up of men, as is much of the Capitol Hill staff. While this work could be considered more “masculine” her way of articulating what she does—saying that she “helped” with the bills, rather than trying to push them through congress—could be considered feminine.

Dottie also occupies a space that is betwixt and between the normative categories of identity. For one, she embraced the role of stay-at-home mother. She remembered the time of her life when she filled this role with a great fondness:

I loved it. I felt like I could give my kids a little more time than I do now. When someone comes home, a child comes home from school, I do think they want to share with some of their parents—“hey, this is what I did.” And I think that’s what we miss in a society. Just taking time to listen to children, our family members or each other.

Indeed, Dottie revered the “traditional” motherhood role. It was something she loved to do, and she viewed this work as a productive way to make a positive impact on the world. According to her, attentive mothers are “missed” in “society” and a reason for the greater problems of the country.

Concurrently, Dottie clearly enjoyed the glamour and energy of Washington. During the second interview, Dottie answered the door wearing a groovy, multi-colored dress. When I complimented her outfit, she smiled and replied, “It’s a 70s dress. The new style on the hill.” At the first interview, Dottie talked about her life in Washington and indicated that she loves her work now, just as she loves her work as a stay-at-home mom:

I’ve been on the hill for a long time. I love it. I don’t boast about anything I do. It’s very interesting. I have met everybody from Anna Nicole Smith to Michael Jackson when he came through the capitol. I had breakfast this morning with Karl Rove. I’ve been around, but it’s not a big deal, its just kind of cool.

Here, Dottie is clearly quite taken with life on Capitol Hill, where she has had the opportunity to interact with reality television stars, pop musicians and prominent conservatives. In other parts of the interview, she talked about how her work allowed her to contribute to society and influence issues of abortion and “human trafficking.” Her political work could be considered more “masculine,” but Dottie was clearly talented and experienced in this area. Indeed, Dottie occupies a space between the normative societal categories of “stay-at-home Mom” and “professional woman.” Here, she negotiates these two parts of her identity by downplaying her work on the hill, and saying that it “not a big deal.”

Jennifer, another politically active Christian woman, also lived between a domestic role and the professional one. I wandered down the marble hallways of a congressional office building to meet Jennifer for interview in a tiny, cramped lobby of the Republican Congressman’s office where she worked. Even though we met in the middle of the summer, which is generally considered to be a congressional slow period, the office buzzed with energy. CSPAN hummed in the background though out our conversation, and interns shuffled in and out of the lobby. Various Capital Hill journals

and newspapers scattered around the room announced upcoming bills and congressional events, meetings and projects.

In this office, Jennifer worked on international issues, and focused most of her energy on responding to situations in which people are denied freedom to practice their religion of choice. Jennifer had two master's degrees: one in education and another in international human rights. She told me she has studied "child rights, religious freedom, refugee issues, development and human rights issues." Her job did not just take her out of the home, but out of the country. She had traveled to Turkey, Israel, Algeria, Germany, Egypt and the Sudan to speak to people from many faith backgrounds who face discrimination and adversity due to their religious beliefs. When I met her, she was on her way to Indonesia, India and Bangladesh. Jennifer's work and lifestyle defied conventional gender roles—it is rare for women in both conservative and liberal communities to travel alone to developing countries which are experiencing conflict.

Jennifer had been challenging gender ideals within her community since she was a young woman. In college, she took a class about women's ministry, where she had a professor who encouraged her to explore social issues. Once she graduated, she taught at a youth ministry, when another teacher arrived and asked her to leave because of her gender. She said that she thought, "here I am, I've been taking care of this for so long....you are doing something really inappropriate." Her pastor apologized for the incident and Jennifer kept teaching. Today, Jennifer continues to work in a job where she asserts her knowledge and experience, and contributes to legislation and policy alongside men. She said she would not date a man unless he thinks that women can be ministers.

Jennifer was also positioned in a liminal space, in that she had become used to taking a leadership role in her career, yet identifies within a tradition that encourages men to lead. This dynamic impacted her personal life:

I need to learn more, [and allow] men the opportunity of taking ...leadership. One person I'm dating, we broke up, and I really had to not call him, let him take that leadership role. That is, I mean, challenging for me because I am so used to it. I think that often women like me tend to want to be leaders in relationships, instead of letting them lead. And I think that they need to lead. I mean, ultimately, a woman wants to be sought after. You know? I don't care what kind of feminist you are. You want to know that someone is chasing after you, even if you are chasing, you want to know that something is coming back at you, you didn't just conquer something.

Here, Jennifer's words reflect some of the tension of living a life between the "traditional" roles and "modern" roles. Jennifer articulated some more "traditional" beliefs on gender. As she dated and looked for a partner, she wanted to let men "take that leadership role." She believed that women should be "sought after" as opposed to the other way around. However, it is difficult to follow this paradigm, because she herself occupies a "leadership role" within the professional sphere.

The fourth woman, Allison, is a Christian who worked at a conservative organization that is not officially religiously affiliated. However, Allison fought for many of the same causes as Joan and Dottie, such as "traditional marriage and pro-life." Allison's accomplishments and professional influence were also clear from the moment I stepped into her office. She too had a massive desk, huge windows and a view of a wide Washington avenue. Her walls were lined with photos of her receiving awards and posing with influential conservatives.

A quick Google search of Allison's name reveals several clips of her commenting on cable news networks and speaking at prestigious events. In several of these clips, she speaks about US sovereignty and immigration. She described herself as "a secure-borders, attrition through enforcement, immigration crackdown person." When Allison



said this to me, I was surprised to hear her use this type of language. I thought that it seemed more severe and direct compared to the softer, family-oriented rhetoric of the other Christian women I had interviewed. However, when I shared this analysis with Allison over e-mail, she disagreed. She said that, “I don’t think these comments are harsh and aggressive” and added that “these people are breaking the law and I am advocating for enforcing it.” One could read Allison’s comments as either hard-line or “just enforcing.” However, it is clear that Allison is active and outspoken about her views, and passionate about issues relating to immigration.

These four people break “traditional” roles for women by holding positions of influence and authority in the political sphere, where men have traditionally held most authority and continue to do so today. Yet, none of these women identified as feminist. Allison rolled her eyes while speaking about the “angry feminists” and told me a story about when she had argued with a feminist professor in college. When I asked Dottie if she considered herself a feminist, she said no. Subsequently, she mentioned a woman who showed up to protest at one of her pro-life press conferences, “with blood all over her” and a “coat hanger” swinging around, suggesting she associates feminism with militant, graphic protests. Joan thought that feminists “would want to take away the opportunity for women to stay at home.” Jennifer said she could not be a feminist because “it aligns with something that is completely contradictory to the Christian faith.” She described a “pure feminism” that advocated “the worship of certain female deities.” Though the feminist movement today is made of up of diverse groups of women fighting for equality on issues of race, class and gender, these four women dissociated themselves with it, and seemed to view the movement as crass, monolithic and irrelevant to their lives.

Although all of these women held powerful positions, they also had great respect for the more “traditional” women’s role of a stay-at-home mom and some indicated that they would rather be in that position. When I interviewed her in the summer of 2008, Allison was in the process of leaving her job, in part because she wanted to have a family. She told me “the decision to take a lower profile job and move out into the suburbs is so I can look and find the right person, and have more time to myself even.” Dottie, during our interview, noted that she “always wanted to be a Mom at home” and had taken on a job in part to provide for her family. Joan is not married, but mentioned the benefits of the stay-at-home role for women several times while we spoke. She told me, for instance, that many recent women graduates of Harvard Business School are choosing to stay at home and support their children, after growing up in families where many women did not. She believes that this anecdote proves that even the smartest, most educated women recognize the benefits of having a mother at home. Jennifer said that she is actually “very domestic in a sense” and wouldn’t mind leaving for a low-profile job.

Why, if the four of these women were so passionate about “traditional” roles, were they outside those roles themselves? How is it possible for women to fight to keep the “traditional family” in the American social landscape, while not necessarily having one herself? Each one of these women had her own complicated explanation and understanding for her lifestyle. These women were protean in that they were negotiating multiple layers of experience and ideologies as they navigated through different spheres of their own lives.

Numerous anthropologists have argued that the act of articulating one’s life narrative helps a person understand her identity and situate herself in the world. In her

book *Contested Lives*, Faye Ginsberg analyzes the narratives of pro-life and pro-choice activists from Fargo, North Dakota. She calls these narratives “procreation stories” and contends that activists understand their own work and political affiliations through retelling their experiences.<sup>104</sup> She asked her informants to tell her the story of their lives, so that she could understand how their personal identity was linked to their beliefs of abortion and their worldview.<sup>105</sup> Ginsburg’s powerful ethnography demonstrates how private stories and experiences can engender activity that is public and prominent. Actors, according to Ginsberg, “shape and are shaped by the local and supralocal contexts” but also alter these contexts as they engage in the world around them.<sup>106</sup>

In a similar way, these four women situated and explained their own complicated, multi-layered identities through recounting different life events and influences. Their geographic and cultural backgrounds, education, personal journeys to authority and positions in the US economy all provided important contexts that informed their identities.

#### *Individualism and Personal Rises to Authority*

One layer of the identity for these four women was their political conservatism. All were affiliated with offices that took similar conservative stances on issues such as abortion, national sovereignty, sex education and gay marriage. Their biographies had some commonalities as well: none of these women were born into highly influential or political families, but rather, each one had grown up in a rural area or a small-town community. Dottie was raised on a farm, Allison came from a rural town, Joan grew up

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<sup>104</sup> Ginsburg, *Contested Lives*, 133.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

in a single-family household with many children. Jennifer's hometown is a small community in Southern California where it is rare to follow politics or international affairs.

All of these women had grown up in areas where conservative political viewpoints were the norm. The political ideals of their original communities no doubt continue to influence their beliefs today. In addition, their own personal stories about rising to prominent positions from small-town communities could also inform their conservative identities and negative feelings about feminism. Since they themselves had "made it" many of them did not see gender as constrictive, or believe that women are systematically disadvantaged in greater American society.

Allison used her personal experience to explain her conservative viewpoints on gender dynamics. Allison went very quickly from living in a very rural town to a position in Washington where she consistently appeared on television. She elaborated on her situation in an interview:

Obviously, I've achieved a lot in my life, at a young age. I've had every opportunity afforded to me. I think, there's a difference between a mandatory role, and roles that you choose. And that's actually how I feel. I feel like I've been able to choose the role that I want. I wanted to achieve, I was valedictorian of my high school class, I graduated school Phi Beta Kappa.

Allison explained that "traditional" roles in her tiny rural home were "very, very prominent." At the same time, there was room for her to go beyond those roles. In her childhood and adolescence, she "played every sport there ever was" and "would rather go on a football date, go watch a football game, then go to the ballet any day." Later, she achieved more than many of her male colleagues, graduating high school at the top of her class, and achieving membership in an elite academic society at her small, liberal arts college. Allison's personal experience informed her ideas about women and gender as a whole. She came from a very conservative, "traditional" community herself, but she

“never, ever felt disadvantaged because [she] was a woman.” She emphasized that her experiences were not the result of advantages or background, but stemmed from the fact that she chose to be successful.

Allison indicated that she did not feel that class was a serious barrier to individuals who wanted to achieve. Her own parents “were not making a lot of money” but because she “worked hard” and took advantage of different programs she was able to succeed. Her own experience informed her opinion about the American system as a whole. She said that “there are really not many reasons” that someone could not afford college, because in the United States, “we are so lucky to have so many great options to learn.” She had managed to rise quickly to a powerful position, and implied that most other people could do the same if they just tried hard enough.

Other informants had similar points of view. When asked if women faced challenges that men do not face, Dottie replied, “women have a lot of things that go on with their bodies, as compared to men” and further explained that women have to deal with hormonal changes, and put more effort into dressing up for work every day. While a feminist might have cited sexism or gender inequality as the most challenging factors for women in the professional world, Dottie indicated that biological issues were the most limiting factor for women. In a follow-up interview, Dottie further commented, “I don’t feel like women are at the bottom of the totem pole—I feel like we have rose above that. Just because times have changed.” She explained that there are fewer women in politics simply because “Maybe that’s just not our goal, that’s not where we want to go. Politics is a tough thing when you are a man or a woman.” She herself desired to stay at home rather than going into politics, and concluded that probably most other women

did as well. Perhaps because of her own personal experience and rise to authority, she did not believe that women are systematically disadvantaged as a group.

Allison and Dottie's personal experiences and conservative backgrounds could provide an explanation for why they reject feminism while behaving in outspoken, active ways that might be labeled feminist. They themselves felt that they had made their own choices, and had not dealt with systematic discrimination, and applied these experiences to formulate beliefs about women as a whole. Both of these women were white, which means that had probably not experienced racial discrimination first-hand. It follows that they would have negative feelings about feminism, a movement that generally aims to combat societal inequalities along lines of race, class and gender. This personal conservative background provides one layer of their protean selves, their identities and their understandings of gender. A second layer stems from their passion on the abortion issue.

### *Abortion and Action*

Indeed, for at least three of these women being "pro-life" was another important part of their identity. This viewpoint was engendered by their beliefs in the abilities of the individual and their faith in God.<sup>107</sup> For instance, Allison explained her pro-life stance by speaking about the rights of individual people.<sup>108</sup> She distanced herself from those who believe "you can take another person's life" because of your "own personal circumstance." She elaborated on her position in this way:

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<sup>107</sup> I did not speak to Jennifer about the abortion issue. As explained in my methods section, I generally let interviewees guide the direction of the interview and speak about issues that were important to them. Jennifer spoke more about her international work, though this does not mean that she did not care about abortion as well.

<sup>108</sup> In this paper, Allison comes off as much more secular than the other women. This could be due to the fact that she was working at an organization that is not faith-based, and I was interviewing her in a professional context.

If you support pro-life, you see that there is a value in life. There is value in the very beginning of life....if you are not going to have that kind of respect for life, what kind of respect can you have for any other freedom? It is really about letting the individual become the best that they can be. If they can't even be that individual because their life is taken, then they can't exercise the first amendment, they can't become informed citizens, they can't be a part of the process, they can't contribute to society.

Here, Allison's belief in individuality informs two parts of her pro-life stance. In the previous section of this paper, she emphasized that she had faced difficult circumstances herself throughout her life, yet had worked hard and made choices to arrive at the position where she is today. Here, she disagrees with the stance of people who believe that due to difficult "circumstance[s]" a woman should be able to choose to have an abortion. In addition, she believed that the life of an individual starts at conception. According to her, from that point, the individual had the right to become "the best that they can be."

Other women also emphasized their belief that an individual becomes a full person at the moment of conception. Women who worked in openly faith-based organizations linked this belief to the idea of a God who has an individual plan for each human being. Joan said that, "from a Biblical position, its God that creates human life, and creates each one of us with a purpose." Dottie noted that she did not believe in abortion because "No matter what the situation is, that's a life given by God." Dottie and Joan believed in a God that was powerful enough to give each human life, even at the zygote stage, a "purpose." In their mind, aborting a fetus, even in the earliest stages, was an act of murder.

As explained before, these women believed strongly in the value of "traditional" gender roles. However, they also held a passionate conviction that abortion was wrong, and thought that Christians should not be isolationist, but heavily involved and engaged in politics and the public sphere. Dottie believed that "when there is something I really

believe in, when I want to make it happen... I'm that type of woman. If I feel something is right, I try to work toward it." Joan elaborated a similar position in this exchange:

Sarah: So you seem to be really passionate about the life issue. Why is that the most important issue?

Joan: That's what brought me here. And its because the most fundamental human right is the right to live. If you don't have the right to live, you can't have any other rights.

Joan further explained her passion about these issues throughout interviews. She believed that God created each human life, and that "He's also instructed each on of us to ensure that each one of us is protected." Through her experiences fighting abortion in Texas to running an organization that fights it in Washington, she said that she has really seen "first hand the importance of Christians being involved in each aspect of society."

This belief creates another layer of influence for these women's protean selves. They believed that women should generally play an important role in the home as a mother and wife. At the same time, they strongly believed that God had an individual plan for each person's life from conception, and that abortion was a gross injustice. While believing in the abilities of the individual, they also believed that humans had a responsibility to one another, and that Christians had the duty to engender change in society. Their words echoed the purpose of previous conservatives who have called for Christians to play an influential role in society: the men at the 1942 National Conference for United Action among Evangelicals, the reconstructionists, and Jerry Falwell. At once, these women balanced beliefs in a "traditional" role and Christian societal engagement.



### *Balancing Roles in the Contemporary US Economy*

These women also situated their lives and actions in context of the structure of the United States capitalist economy. Although these women indicated that they desired to have “traditional” roles, they explained that it is logistically very difficult to be a full-time domestic wife and career woman at the same time. Or, they indicated that they would rather be stay-at-home moms, but in some cases had to earn money in order to support their families.

Throughout our interview, Dottie had several subtle critiques about the way that the U.S. economy is structured. When speaking about her position on life issues, she mentioned the cost of childcare as a reason a woman might get an abortion. She noted “infant care isn’t \$50 a week like it used to be, its \$250 plus.” In this context, a woman is forced to make a very difficult choice, and many women struggle to make ends meet if they do end up having the child. The need for financial stability had also influenced Dottie’s personal decision to go to work. She indicated that she would have preferred to be a stay at home Mom, but had headed to the office in order to support her family. She said she had been “the head of the household” at times and noted that “we live in a time now that women work and you have to learn to balance everything and budget what you do.”

Dottie’s position indicates that at times professional conservative Christian women must simultaneously embrace the “modern” paradigm, even if they believe that the “traditional” one is the ideal. In today’s American economy, there is little support for mothers who choose to stay home with their children, and who do not receive wages or salary for the work they perform for their families. When times are difficult, these women recognized that families often must make tough decisions, and women might

have to compromise their dedication to “traditional” roles. Several years ago, when the economy changed for the worse, Dottie had to go to work to support her family, even though she says would have preferred to be a stay-at-home mom. At the time of the interview, she continued to work outside the family in order to support herself and her extended family.

Allison also related her straddled position between a working role and a family role to the way that the professional world is structured. She loved her work, but also held a passion for a “traditional” woman’s role. However, because of the way the professional world is structured, it is very difficult to hold both positions at the same time. She explained,

It’s frustrating, cause you are fighting for the family, and you are fighting for all these great ideals, but you are not really a part of it....You are expected to give more and more of yourself, because “well, you don’t need to leave early. You don’t have kids. You are not going to their soccer games.” And, it’s like, how are you going to get one if you stay at this job all the time!

As I noted before, when Allison and I met she was in the process of leaving her high-profile job in Washington for a less demanding one elsewhere. She wanted to have more time to herself and start a family. Allison’s comments here make it clear how hard it can be to balance family and work in the United States today. Even while Allison advocated for “pro-family” policies, she has felt pressure to work long hours that inhibited her from starting a family herself. She suggested that if women fully follow everything that is expected of them at the office, it’s simply not possible to “get” a family too, at least at the same time. She elaborated her position further in an e-mail correspondence:

I was saying that women have to set their own expectations for themselves and their lives and then adjust accordingly to get what they want. If a professional environment sets an expectation (even unspoken) that you work 60 hrs a week, as an individual you must decide if that job is worth sacrificing other things in your life. For me, I have determined that I accomplished all I wanted in the high profile job and now I want to focus on creating a vibrant life of family and community.

Allison did not want to blame the American economic system for forcing her to make a decision between a “high profile job” and a “vibrant life of family.” Rather, she saw this decision as a personal, individual choice that women must make “for themselves.”

However, it is clear that the structure of the American professional world influenced Allison’s choices. Since she wanted to create a “vibrant life of family,” she had to move on and restructure her life in a different city. The Washington office culture is not designed for people who want to do both at the same time.

Joan also noted that it was not logistically possible to concurrently have a family and a high-profile job. When she told me that, “if I had a family, I wouldn’t be doing this,” she suggested she believes that it simply isn’t possible to be a “good” Mom and wife and hold a high-ranking job at the same time. Indeed, in a society where women are expected to be a homemaker and primary care giver, it is very difficult to hold long hours while performing in the office.

These women used their positions in the American economy and professional world to explain their current positions and their views on gender. For Dottie, being a working woman was a necessity when she wanted to support her family. Joan and Allison could embrace the working woman ideal and the “traditional” ideal simultaneously, while indicating that due to the structure of the professional world they could not fully follow through with both. Indeed, these women’s positions in the American capitalist economy informed more layers of their protean selves.

### *Multiple Layers and God’s Unique Plan for You*

Certainly, these women’s viewpoints and experiences were influenced by multiple ideologies and economic pulls and pushes. As professional women who were

deeply committed to “traditional” roles, they performed multiple parts at different times in their lives. What allowed these conservative Christian women, who are so often believed to hold unchangeable, absolute beliefs, to balance so many competing discourses? Their particular divine fluidity was their belief in a personal, interactive, all-knowing God who makes individual plans for Christians. All four women mentioned the personal role that God or Jesus plays in their lives, and several of them elaborated to explain how “He” influenced their professional careers.

All of them cited both personal choice and God as reasons for their success, though some stressed one more than the other. Jennifer, for instance, described her motivations for her own work in this way:

I do what I’m doing only because I know I’ve been called to do it. It’s not really for any other reason. It’s not financial; it’s not to go save the world either. I know that there’s a lot of people who are socially active...that’s not really what it’s for. To be honest, if God called me away from working here, I would be perfectly fine with it. I’m only here to do His work.

Jennifer believed in an all-knowing God, who has a personal call for her life and work. As a Christian, Jennifer wanted to follow this plan, perform the work that God had chosen for her. She added later that God had called her to do something, and “until He calls me out of it, that’s just what I am going to do.” This belief allowed her to stay in a professional job, while holding a strong belief in the “traditional” roles at the same time. While she had great respect for women who are wives and mothers (and a desire to be one herself eventually) she believed that at the moment, God had personally created the unusual path that she walked.

It is important to highlight here that the four narratives and explanations from these women occasionally contrasted with one another. Allison, like Jennifer, articulated that it was “the Lord’s plan” for her to be successful in politics, but she spent much more

time emphasizing that she had made difficult choices throughout her life and worked hard to arrive at her current position. On the other hand, Jennifer mentioned some personal accomplishments, but spent more time stressing that God is fully in control of her life. She downplayed her own agency, and distanced herself from those who are trying to be “socially active” for the sake of the material world.

Joan also indicated that her own professional and familial situation was not entirely in her control, but part of God’s personal calling for her. She said she “could not have predicted how my life turned out” and that she “had never been one to do a five year plan.” Rather, “God has always had his own plan” and she tried to be open to it. Getting married was not high on her priority list, rather, she desired to know and follow God, and stay open to what “He” had in store for her. These statements indicate that she believes that God is the one personally planning her life, to the point where she would find it pointless to try to plan for it on her own. Dottie also spoke about a personal relationship with God. She believed that God talks to her throughout the day, and guides her actions, even through simple phrases like “um, this is the right thing that you should be doing.” God has also been the ones to “put mountains” and challenges in front of her. For these women, it is acceptable to advocate for the “traditional” role while not following it themselves. Following this logic, they were merely following along with God’s individual specific plans for each one of them.

These testimonies directly challenge the widely held belief that conservative Christianity pushes women to stay in the home. In some contexts and interpretations, women can use conservative Christian beliefs to explain their unusual positions as powerful advocates. In addition, the belief in a God who is personally invested in the lives of individuals may also inform anti-feminist sentiments. If God is in control of each

woman's life, there is no need for collective action to improve inequalities in this world along lines of race, class and gender. Indeed, faith provided another layer that influenced the ways that these conservative Christian women understood their own complicated positions and articulated views gender and feminism.

### *Protean Articulations of Gender*

These women were negotiating several layers of experience and identity. They grew up in conservative contexts and individually rose to positions of authority themselves. Yet, many of them gave God credit for their personal successes. Though their beliefs might be considered “traditional” they were also participating in a fast-paced political sphere and in the United States economy. They believed that God had individual plans for each person, but that Christians had a responsibility to mold the world around them, and in particular, to end abortion. They used ideals from their historical, religious, cultural and economic contexts in order to explain their seemingly contradictory positions in society today. The way all four of these women articulated beliefs about gender was complex and multi-faceted, influenced by their own balancing of diverse rhetoric and influences. Their articulations about gender were distinctly protean, in that they allowed some room for people to take on different tasks and occasionally transcend “traditional” gender roles depending on context.

For example, Joan believed that there were biological differences between men and women, saying that, “Men and women are different. Even homosexuals and lesbians would acknowledge, men and women are different. That's why they prefer one or the other.” This statement reflects certain “traditional” ideals of conservative Christianity,

namely, the belief that men and women are distinctly, biologically dissimilar. Joan seemed to believe that there is a natural binary between the two genders.

However, at the same time, Joan's articulations about the differences between men and women were not completely black and white, but also slightly ambiguous. They shifted depending on the time, context and circumstances. Joan noted, "I'm a pretty strong person. At times I find I am stronger than some men. And I know some men that are more caring, in the way they think, than I would be." She added, "Often times, what it may be is in a certain circumstance, I may be acting stronger. But then in a later circumstance, with the same people, I may not be." Joan's explanations of gender roles here allow space for them to be somewhat flexible. Men can take on "feminine" characteristics and vice-versa. In certain "times" depending on her own personal situation and goals, she could become "strong" or even stronger than men, and less "caring" than them as well. Although she believed in "traditional" set roles at the base, she also recognized that there were spaces where it was appropriate and necessary to go beyond these roles.

In a first draft, I suggested that Joan's articulations imply that she believes that a certain degree of gender-bending is possible. I sent this analysis to her over e-mail. Though she had enjoyed the draft as a whole, she disagreed with some of the points that it made, and clarified her position in this way:

I would be chagrined to think that a reader may come away with the idea that I think that gender can bend and switch (overlooking the key word "roles"). The use of the word "bend" with gender can be loaded.

Here, Joan differentiated between "gender" and "gender roles." It seems that she believed that "gender" is a biological, divinely ordained characteristic that could not be switched. She had articulated earlier that "men and women are different." According to

her explanations, these characteristics are set, and it is not possible for “gender” to “bend and switch.” However, on top of that, Joan noted that there were “gender roles” which could shift depending on circumstances.

Earlier in this thesis, I defined “sex” as the biological characteristics of a person, while gender is the societal expectations and performative roles inscribed on top of biological parts. With these definitions, it is difficult for a person to change his or her “sex” without an operation of some sort. However, since gender is influenced by society, it can be transcended or broken. In a way, Joan articulates a similar position, though her language and definitions vary. To her, “gender” is unchangeable, while various “gender roles” are not fixed, but may shift depending on context. In a way, our positions are surprisingly similar.

Someone from outside Joan’s tradition might be tempted to judge her beliefs as hypocritical or inconsistent. If she did believe that “gender roles” could occasionally switch, and embodies these “switches” herself on occasion, why would she advocate for policies that encourage “traditional” roles for women? This judgment is too simplistic, and fails to look deeply at the context out of which Joan’s particular beliefs emerged. With Lifton’s protean self theory, we can see that Joan was not merely being inconsistent, but rather, she was reflecting multiple, competing discourses and contexts of our own time. It is impossible to live in today’s world and constantly, consistently operate in one mode or framework. Joan’s own personal rise to an influential position, and her faith in a God personally invested in her life engendered her belief that women can be powerful, strong and important. In addition, her religious tradition informed her idea of a God who created men and women to be different, and who wants Christians to be heavily involved in society today. She was trying to live out all these beliefs in the



context of the Washington professional world and the US capitalist economy. These multiple influences came together to inform Joan's belief on gender, which is founded on "traditional" ideals, but also allowed room for her to navigate different situations and switch when necessary.

Joan's protean conceptions of gender also influenced the way she articulated her beliefs on marriage. Joan believed that in a marriage, wives should submit to their husbands. However, her understanding of submission was complicated. She described submission not as a ruler-ruled relationship, but as "dynamic, mutual respect." She cited an oft-quoted passage in the Bible that reads "men, love your wives, wives, respect and submit to your husbands."<sup>109</sup> She explained that a husband should love his wife so much that he is willing to die for her. With this kind of love, women should be able to submit because they know their husbands love them, and husbands are not going to ask for something "wrong, or harmful or selfish."

Joan indicated that submission is not a biological or natural feature of women, but rather, submission is something that one learns and works at. She acknowledged that she would have a difficult time in such a relationship, explaining "I think it would be very hard. Because I've not had to do that. It would take a lot of work on my part to be able to do that." For Joan, submission was not an innate quality to women. Rather, the ability to submit depended on the personal circumstances of each individual. She recognized that her personal situation fell outside the ideal Christian relationship.

Here, Joan balanced many different ideas as she spoke about relationships, one of submission and one of equality. Although she contended that these two ideals could go hand in hand, in practice, they cannot. "Submission" implies that one party regularly

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<sup>109</sup> Here, Joan paraphrases Ephesians 5:22-29, (New International Version).

and consistently gives into the other. Though “submission” may be accompanied by respect, it cannot exist unless one person has less agency in the relationship than the other. However, with her definition that embodies both submission and respect, Joan was not being deceitful or two-faced. She was balancing the ideals of her religious tradition with other parts of her reality.

Dottie too held complex beliefs about gender, informed by her experiences and affiliations with multiple ideologies. After researching Dottie’s organization, I expected to hear her articulate clear, clean-cut beliefs about the differences between men and women. However, Dottie’s explanation was far from absolute:

You know, that’s hard to say. Each woman is different, and each man is different. So it probably would be hard to say. From my experience...I’m trying to think of an example. I can come from sometimes, it’s just my case, I may not even be speaking for everyone... I can come from a softer perspective, a feeling perspective. A man may be coming from a little bit stronger point of view.

Here, Dottie was, in a way, articulating a “traditional” viewpoint about gender. She, as a woman, “may” come from “feeling” perspective, while the men “may” come from a “stronger point of view.” However, she also acknowledged that gender is complicated, that “each person is different.” She only spoke for herself, and her explanation was full of “sometimes” and “mays” that allowed for much exchange and ambiguity. These loopholes allowed space for her own experience, where she was at once a “traditional” woman and an outspoken, influential public figure and breadwinner in her family.

Jennifer also had protean articulations about gender, influenced by her professional life, her faith tradition, and also her international work. She had seen places in the past where gender shifts and changes, noting “In my field of work, being overseas so much, there’s a lot of places where the men are carried off to prison or whatever, and the women have to step up and lead the churches.” Here, she recognized that gender

roles are informed by particular situations and contexts. She cited a situation where roles for women can shift and change after particular political or social happenings. In addition, Jennifer wanted to contextualize the teachings in the Bible that limit women's ability to hold leadership positions. After referencing a verse in the Bible that prohibits women from leading and teaching, Jennifer said, "I think the reason Paul said women couldn't teach is because something specific that was happening in the church he was dealing with. There was a lot of heresy...women weren't being taught in synagogues...they were teaching heresy, which was causing problems in the church."<sup>110</sup> Once again, she recognized that the appropriate rules on gender could switch depending on the circumstances. The gender roles from the past were not necessarily applicable for today.

### *Conclusions*

The women I interviewed were in dynamic, complicated positions where they played several roles and negotiated multiple layers of ideology and experiences as they went about their day-to-day lives. Their beliefs and articulations were loaded with competing ideologies about the importance of social responsibility, individual action and choice. Some of these ideologies butted heads and conflicted, but all had significance for each of these women. From what I observed, the women found a way to maintain each of these ideologies within their lives, and fluidly move from one role to another. The tension between the conflicting roles was smoothed over and understood through their belief in a God who has specific plans for them.

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<sup>110</sup> Here, Jennifer references 1 Timothy 2:12 (New International Version), which reads, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she must be silent."

Critics of conservative Christianity call the movement for being absolute, unchanging and irrelevant in today's times. However, the professional women that I interviewed had complex, multi-faceted beliefs about gender that reflected their choices and lifestyles, and the multiple ideological pulls and pushes of life in the United States today. They had cultivated protean identities, balanced a number of different "traditional" and "modern" ideas, and had the ability to shift roles depending on circumstance. In an earlier time, where women perhaps did not have to deal with so many competing ideas, their articulations about gender might not have been so multi-layered and complex. Though Joan played an influential role in American politics today, she said that she would not have been involved in the suffragette movement in the early twentieth century, and explained that she would have had other "priorities." Perhaps during that time, she would not have to negotiate so many competing discourses.

Though members of the "Christian Right" are often believed to hold unchangeable beliefs on gender and sexuality, each community that I studied understood these concepts in unique and complicated ways. In the next section, I will look at the complexities of gender and sexuality for a group of Christian women on the opposite side of the country.

### ***III. Fluid Surrenders, Flexible Sexualities***

*Katie, member of the Ladies for the Lord: "Imagine if we could see people through God's eyes?"*

*Tina, another member: "Everyone would be so hot!"*

The Ladies for the Lord who were early to the meeting chatted about their jobs, their love lives, and their new plans for the ministry. Every other week, this ministry group gathers to share their testimonies of faith, talk about their experiences in the sex industry, and discuss the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives. As we sat waiting for the 7:30 PM meeting to begin, Katie, a young woman with blond hair and freckles, spoke about the ways that God guides every one of their gatherings.

Testimonial sharing is so important, she explained, because young women who come for the first time often need a space where they can talk about their experiences. But this week the Ladies felt that they were being led to change the style of the meetings. Carla, one of the group leaders, felt that the Lord wanted them to incorporate more regular Bible study.

The Haven Church, the mega-church that supported the Ladies of the Lord, was also home to a high school, and the ministry group used a science classroom for their meeting that week. One young woman, Emily, had brought a tiny Yorkshire puppy that

alternated between sleeping in her black jacket and scampering around the shiny white tile floor. There was a giant periodic table on the wall, along with a few photographs of nature and wildlife. At the front of the classroom, above the whiteboard, was poster of the roof mural on the Sistine Chapel. In it, Adam reached out longingly for his creator.

As the Ladies for the Lord trickled in for their meeting, I felt privileged to be invited and included in their group, but also slightly out of place. Many of the Ladies were stylishly dressed, and wore skirts, heels and carried fancy handbags. Emily, for instance, had a trendy dog and wore her hair in a choppy, platinum blond cut. I, on the other hand, had driven a few hours in the rain to attend the meeting. My hair was frizzy and tangled from the fatal combination of the car's humidifier and the weather outside.

I had so many questions for the women of this ministry group, but only a limited amount of research time to find some semblance of answers. I was especially curious about what the Ladies meant when they said they let the Lord guide the group meetings every week. During my research with this group of women, I heard nearly every woman articulate ideas about submitting to God and letting "Him" take control of their life. Women talked about surrendering to God within their marriage, in their career choices, and in their outreach to women working in the sex industry. What did it mean to them to surrender to God? And how did submitting "Him" impact their own agency, and their beliefs on gender and sexuality? Finally, how did these women understand what seemed to be contradiction to me? They idealized for "traditional" rules on sexuality, yet did most of their outreach work to people publicly breaking those rules. They also openly discussed issues of sexuality in their meetings, and were not shy about sharing their past "sins" with me.

Like many of the women interviewed for the other chapters, the women I met from the Ladies for the Lord found empowerment and joy while being obedient to God. However, the process of surrendering to the Lord entailed much more than passivity and compliance. Rather, submission was a meaningful part of making major life decisions, operating in day-to-day life, and performing outreach in the community. Beliefs in submission were heavily tied to beliefs in traditional gender roles and set rules for sexuality. Along with submitting to God, a woman in a Christian marriage was supposed to submit to her husband. In surrendering her body to God, she was supposed to stay chaste until marriage, and then enjoy awesome, divinely inspired sex with a Christian husband.

Many women highlighted the practical benefits of submission. Within marriage, submission was not about a top-down command structure, but it entailed mutually surrendering to God and sharing responsibility for the finances and for the family. In the context of a country facing an economic crisis, women emphasized that submission to God and to husbands was freeing and comforting rather than constraining.

Most importantly, the Ladies for the Lord did not believe that submission was a irreversible, once-occurring action, but an evolving, long-term process. This type of submission gave room for women to “fall” in sin and come back to God multiple times, to re-find the love of God and re-commit their lives to the church even if they broke the rules on sex. The belief in a developing submission process was this group’s divine fluidity. Although there was a set of rules on sexuality that most women aspired to follow, they could, at times, break these rules and still find acceptance in the group and forgiveness from God. The belief in a fluid submission also impacted the way that the Ladies for the Lord conducted outreach. They said that they did not want to force

women in the sex industry to convert, but tried to guide them along a path where they would find God for themselves. When women joined the ministry, and indicated that they had an interest in finding God, there was room for these women to break the rules of sexuality and still find community and other resources from the group.

Indeed, the ideals of fluid submission allowed women who might not find acceptance in other Christian communities to find support and spirituality with the Ladies for the Lord. However, at times, the emphasis on submission also could have also created limits for the group's outreach. By surrendering to God and believing that "He" is ultimately in control of the work they do, some of the members seemed to avoid thinking critically about the nature of their outreach. They placed so much emphasis on surrendering to God's love, and risked alienating or angering certain dancers in the sex industry who did not share their religious beliefs but were in need of other services and support. Though their particular conceptions of faith allowed them to build relationships with people who are often rejected by religious communities, there still were limits to who could join their group. Women who flat out reject their particular rules and standards of sexuality, or do not feel that the sex industry is unequivocally exploitative and wrong, might not feel empowered or welcome in their community.

### *Theories on Submission and Agency*

Other ethnographers have deconstructed ideals of submission and piety in conservative religious communities, and worked to locate the agency of women in these contexts. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood provides a theoretical framework to do this in her article, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent." Mahmood discusses what it means to be an "agent" in one conservative culture with strict gender roles and



set ideas about sexuality. Mahmood's work is originally about conservative Muslim Egyptian women, but ideas from it could also be applied to women in other conservative religious contexts, such as the ministry group Ladies for the Lord.

In the essay, Mahmood expands upon the meaning of the feminist concept of "agency." Typically, Mahmood argues, feminists regard agency as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles."<sup>111</sup> With this definition, agency is the ability of a woman to act and craft her own destiny, and face and conquer various challenges set by patriarchal structures of domination built into culture and society.

Indeed, according to many scholars in women's studies, in order for a woman to practice agency she must challenge these structures or defy her culture's norms and expectations. For instance, as mentioned previously, Judith Butler is famous for declaring that gender identity is not "stable" but rather "stylized repetition of acts through time."<sup>112</sup> Butler believes that gender is not biologically determined, but rather performed through various societal practices. Some women, for instance, perform their normative gender by wearing a skirt and make-up or speaking in a certain way. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler locates agency in "the possibility of a variation" on the "repetition" these hegemonic norms.<sup>113</sup> In other words, in order to be considered an active agent, a woman must actively resist the normative signs and signifiers for gender.

Although not all feminists are in agreement with Butler, similar definitions for agency as resistance are found beyond academia and into the greater liberal feminist

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<sup>111</sup> Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, (2001): 206.

<sup>112</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," *Theatre Journal* 49, (1988): 520.

<sup>113</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

activist world. For instance, the National Organization for Women (NOW) does not define gender as performance on their website, but it does encourage women to actively fight structures of patriarchy which have been normalized in our culture. In its 1966 Statement of Women, NOW asked its members to engage in a “world-wide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders.”<sup>114</sup> This worldview situates women all over the world, in the United States and beyond, as united in a battle against structures of oppression. On its “purpose” page today, the organization declares itself to be dedicated for “fighting for your rights!”<sup>115</sup> Within Butler’s framework or within NOW’s, the Ladies for the Lord become compliant subjects without agency. They are not “fighting for their rights” as women, nor did I observe them to be actively, consciously resisting the norms of gender. Many of them did believe in traditional gender roles for women, and embraced more traditional readings of Biblical stories. For the most part, they dressed and behaved in ways that might be labeled conventionally feminine. In addition, many of them believed strongly that they could not live their life on their own terms, but had to surrender control to God.

However, in her work, Saba Mahmood recognizes that this understanding of agency is too simplistic. Butler and NOW privilege women who actively fight against structures of domination, but they not address other women in different cultural contexts. Mahmood encourages anthropologists to expand upon their language of agency, arguing that “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility

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<sup>114</sup> “National Organization for Women’s 1966 Statement of Purpose,” *National Organization for Women*, <http://www.now.org/history/purpos66.html> (accessed March 16, 2009).

<sup>115</sup> “About Now,” *National Organization for Women*, <http://www.now.org/about.html> (accessed March 15, 2009).

from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency.”<sup>116</sup> To illustrate this point, Mahmood offers an example of a virtuoso piano player. This player “submits herself to the, at times painful, regime of disciplinary practice, as well as hierarchical structures of apprenticeship.”<sup>117</sup> At the end of her rehearsal period, however, the piano player has great skills and respect in her community. Mahmood argues that for Muslim women in Egypt, embodying shyness and surrendering are not forms of passivity, but rather, avenues of self-assertion. On the other hand, Butler’s definition might lead us to observe that this piano player is merely surrendering to cultural norms (like the “hierarchical structures”) instead of challenging them, and conclude that she is not exercising as much agency as a woman who is resisting societal expectations.

Mahmood asserts that the ability to act against structures of domination is a privilege created by certain historical, cultural and political contexts. In her book, Mahmood also calls into question the “normative liberal assumptions about human nature” mainly, the belief that “all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so.”<sup>118</sup> NOW’s mission of “fighting for your rights” and Butler’s need to transcend patriarchal modes of subjectivity are not natural, innate desires of women, but rather, these desires are engendered by certain political and social contexts. Mahmood argues that ethnographers should not only attempt to locate agency in cases where women appear to be passive or working to break societal structures, but that anthropologists should analyze “the capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination

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<sup>116</sup> Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent,” 212.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>118</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

enable and create.”<sup>119</sup> Depending on the situation, women may not appear to be challenging societal norms about gender, but that does not mean they are not asserting themselves within their own context. With this framework, an ethnographer must re-examine the language and practice of the women from the conservative religious groups like the Ladies for the Lord, and go beyond merely labeling them as “unempowered.” How do women find joy through submitting to God and to their partners? Why do women embrace more traditional beliefs on gender and sexuality, when these views seem in fact to limit them? I will explore these questions in the following section.

As mentioned in the introduction, R. Marie Griffith makes a similar argument about conservative Christian women in her book *God's Daughters*. Like Mahmood, Griffith wants to confront liberal feminist notions that label conservative women as unempowered, brainwashed or unintelligent. She challenges readers to look at Christian doctrines of submission and surrender with a new lens, and shows that in certain situations, conservative women can locate agency in such doctrines.

Through ethnography, Griffith explores several ways that doctrines of submission mold the lives of women at the Christian Aglow fellowships, simultaneously creating new opportunities and potential limits for their lives. Several of the women she interviewed were survivors of trauma or physical and sexual abuse. Griffith argues that for these women, the act of submitting to God allows them to find a “sense of having received a new life.”<sup>120</sup> In other words, Aglow provides a language and framework for women who wish to have a sense of rebirth and start their lives over again. The process of submitting to God creates a shift in the way these women conceive and understand themselves. When women accept the Christian doctrines of submission, “their personal

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<sup>119</sup> Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent,” 203.

<sup>120</sup> Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 17.

identity is reshaped, as previous forms of belief and behavior are apparently replaced by new ideals and practices.”<sup>121</sup>

In addition, Griffith argues that submitting to God may be a way for women to find love, affection and acceptance. Griffith reports that women at Aglow who are feeling rejected or downtrodden can personal fulfillment through submission, and “come to feel truly loved by a heavenly father and friend.”<sup>122</sup> For women who feel a lack of humanly love and fulfillment in their lives, submission can be quite valuable and even therapeutic. Griffith’s informants did not believe that they were abandoned and uncared for, but rather, that “God cares about even the slightest concerns of his daughters and will heal them not only of major health problems but of mere annoyances as well.”<sup>123</sup>

In addition, Griffith complicates the commonly held belief that submission within marriage automatically inhibits and restricts women. For women of Aglow, surrendering to a husband was a part of submitting to God. Several women that Griffith interviewed spoke at length about the benefits and joys of surrendering to their spouse. Some women said they had given up “all hope or expectations of martial satisfaction” to accept “the duties bestowed by their supposedly God-given role of wife.”<sup>124</sup> From a feminist perspective, this framework of submission within marriage could be regarded as problematic as it limits women’s agency, and forces them to perform certain duties without giving men the same responsibilities. However, many of Griffith’s informants reported finding “greater happiness” and indicated that their men became more loving and supportive of them when they submitted to their wills. In these narratives, Christian husbands become “the image of a loving Father God: strong yet gentle, a

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 173.

dynamic leader who is unafraid to express tender feeling, stern and rugged in his righteousness yet willing to forgive and respond in benevolence.”<sup>125</sup> Indeed, submitting to a husband can become a way to make a marital partnership work, find more love, and become closer to what is believed to be a divine force.

Though Griffith recognizes that women may find joy and meaning in submitting to their husbands, she also implies that doctrines of submission can place women in dangerous situations. The language of wives yielding to their husbands may evoke images of domestic abuse and battery. Though Griffith heard one Aglow leader tell her audience “you all should *not* put up with abuse from your husbands” (emphasis hers) some of her informants lived with marital difficulties and abuse while insisting that God “was healing their marriage.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, while Griffith recognizes that submitting to God had meaningful implications for many women, she also points to the problems that it may create.

In her conclusion, Griffith encourages readers to look for a “new way of thinking about power structures: not either opposing or conserving certain meanings, but rather understand them as doing both, upholding power arrangements even while exposing them to unexpected challenges.”<sup>127</sup> I have tried to take on her framework, as well as the theories of Saba Mahmood, while researching and writing about the Ladies of the Lord. In this section, I examine the ways that ideals of submission and piety within the group simultaneously empower and limit women and impact their community engagement. A key factor to understanding their particular submission is to realize that it is not considered to be a one-time, monolithic act, but rather, understood to be a fluid and on-

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 212.

going process. Although this belief allows their group to be more open to women who might not be welcome in other Christian communities, it creates limits on the outreach work that they can do.

Tanya Erzen discusses a similar sort of submission in her ethnography *Straight to Jesus*. In this book, Erzen documents the experiences of men at the New Hope ex-gay ministry in San Rafael, California. These men, who struggle with same sex desire, go to New Hope with to overcome their sexuality through faith and cultivate heterosexual attraction.<sup>128</sup> Erzen's informants hoped that that they could transform their sexuality through building a strong relationship with Jesus Christ. She carefully portrays how this transformation is not a one-time, monolithic act, but an extended, complicated effort:

In the ex-gay movement, change is a complex process that incorporates developmental theories of sexual identity, religious proscriptions against homosexuality, biblical prayer, therapeutic group activities, counseling, and self-help steps. The idea of change is the financial, political, religious and personal basis of the ex-gay movement, and it continues to be the fulcrum on which the debate over the fixity or fluidity of sexual identity turns. Change is a conversion process that incorporates religious and sexual identity, desire and behavior. Sexual identity is malleable and changeable because it is completely entwined with religious conversion. Much has been written about the widely publicized sexual scandals of prominent ex-gays, but in the ex-gay movement, it is far more scandalous to abandon Jesus than to yield to same-sex desire....As long as the offender publicly repents and reaffirms her commitment to Jesus, all is forgiven.<sup>129</sup>

The Ladies of the Lord have a different mission than the men at the New Hope ministry. However, both groups work with individuals who break or have broken what are understood to be God's rules of sexuality. Erzen illustrates how complex the process of submitting to Jesus Christ can be. At New Hope, sexual change is not a singular act

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<sup>128</sup> Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 2.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

where an individual merely stops “sinning” but rather a complicated process where “religious and sexual identity, desire and behavior” must all shift.

Similar shifts seemed to happen at this ministry. The Ladies of the Lord believed that sex work is not merely “sin” through they did consider it to be inherently exploitative to women, and against the will of God. However, the Ladies also recognized that women might have legitimate reasons to engage in sex work, such as the need for financial stability. Some talked about sex work as if it was an “addiction” because it paid so well. Like the men at New Hope, the Ladies cultivated an environment and community where a certain amount of “sin” was tolerated, and women had the freedom to come to the group while still working in the sex industry. As long as they wanted to work towards submitting to God and building a relationship with Jesus, “all was forgiven” just like at the ex-gay ministry. If they no longer worked in the sex industry, they could confess their past “sins” (like transactional sex, sexual relationships with other women) and still find acceptance and love from the other Ladies. Finally, women who had not engaged in sex work themselves, but struggled to follow the other rules on sex (like engaging in it pre-martially) could also find support and community in the group.

Mahmood, Erzen, and Griffith’s ethnographies illustrate the diverse ways that ideas of submission are enacted in different religious contexts. To begin dissecting submission for the Ladies of the Lord, we can start by examining how women read and interpret religious texts, and look at how these readings inform their understanding of sexuality, community and identity.



*“Bad Girls” of The Bible*

On the same night that I had driven through the rain to attend a Ladies meeting at the Haven Church, they had decided to read and discuss the Genesis story. Their particular reading, guided by a workbook called *Bad Girls of the Bible*, presented an Eve who was guilty, self-centered, and blameworthy for the fall of humanity. I first judged the reading to be patriarchal and offensive to women. However, in the context of the Ladies for the Lord, this interpretation allowed women to negotiate their dual identities as Christians and women who had worked in the sex industry. As they read and discussed the story, they articulated ideas about their own “falls” along with their recommitments to God.

A few minutes before the meeting began on that rainy night, Carla, the group leader, walked into the room. Her heels clicked on the floor and she carried a box of new workbooks for the evening. She smiled and waved at me, and the other women greeted her warmly. Her long, jet-black hair fell down her back, her eyes were lined with dark make-up, and she wore a rhinestone necklace with a silver key and heart.

Carla set the brown box from under her arm onto the table and pulled out a copy of the group’s new Bible study guide. The other Ladies for the Lord shrieked with excitement. *Bad Girls of the Bible: And What We Can Learn From Them* was a small, slim, shiny green book. Its cover had a long, narrow photo of a woman’s sultry eyes, lined in dark make-up. A few copies circulated around the room.

“Oh my gosh, this is amazing!” said Katie. Carla told the group said she had bought them in bulk, and said that if we wanted to buy our own copy they would cost ten dollars each. Along with the other women of the Ladies for the Lord, I reached for my wallet.

Over the next few minutes, other women trickled into the meeting. As the group slowly grew bigger, I felt a sense of vibrant energy radiating through the room. It was the kind of force I had previously experienced while attending book clubs and women's support groups, the sort of warmth that radiates through the air when a group of women who trust and respect one another gather together. The women continued to laugh and share their stories. Eventually, about fifteen people filled the classroom. Some of them were young, stylish women in their twenties, who wore make-up, jewelry and bright clothing. Others women were in their middle ages. Most women were white, but there were a few members of African, Asian and Latin American descent. People settled into their seats around the cluster of tables pushed together, and the evening Bible study began. Carla instructed us to turn to the first lesson of the book, "All About Evie." The chapter begins:

Mrs. Eve, what *were you* thinking? She was thinking she could get away with one little bite, a temptation we understand only too well. Come learn from Eve's mistakes (while we admit a few of our own) and discover how to "Just Say No" when the Enemy says "Go!"<sup>130</sup>

For the next hour and a half, the workbook guided the Ladies for the Lord through the third chapter of Genesis. Eve, according to *Bad Girls of the Bible*, had "fallen into a trap." She was selfish, her eyes "were on herself instead of God."<sup>131</sup> She had a "craving" that she simply couldn't control.<sup>132</sup> The workbook also included discussion questions, such as "what might you have said to Eve *after* that fatal bite?"

"Honey, was it worth it!?" responded Nina.

"You just jacked us all up!" suggested Rebecca. The other women laughed.

Indeed, according to the book, Eve had in fact jacked us all up: she had been "me

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<sup>130</sup>Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible Workbook*, (Colorado Spring: Waterbrook Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 8.

centered” rather than centered on God. She had also been the one to offer Adam a taste of sin.<sup>133</sup> He, on the other hand, seemed to get off scot-free.

I sat quietly through the meeting, trying to decide if I should participate, and wondering what my feminist anthropology professor would say if she were in the room. The previous week, she had assigned essays that presented several different interpretations of Eve, some similar to the one in *Bad Girls*, and others strikingly different. According to theologian Phyllis Trible, for instance, Eve was not self-centered, but independent, curious and assertive. She had eaten the apple not because she was “me centered” but because she was curious and craved wisdom.<sup>134</sup> Trible has spent a career writing feminist interpretations of various biblical stories, and would probably judge this chapter of *Bad Girls* as a product that reflected and reproduced our patriarchal culture.

Indeed, throughout history, numerous Christian figures have used similar readings to blame women for the suffering of humanity and therefore create unfair limits, rules and punishments for them. For example, Augustine of Hippo, a 5<sup>th</sup> century theologian argued that the serpent convinced Eve to sin first because she was not as intelligent as Adam, and that women on the whole were “built for procreation, limited in rationality and dangerous to men.”<sup>135</sup> Hippo used patriarchal readings of Genesis to argue that women as a whole were dangerous and deceitful, and their entire purpose was for sex and procreation. However, the women in this science classroom were not getting shame and guilt from this reading. Rather, they were laughing with one

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>134</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread,” in *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, ed. Linda Scheearing, Valarie Ziegler, Kristen Kvam, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 435.

<sup>135</sup> Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 97.

another, sharing their own stories, and generally having fun. Through I didn't feel comfortable taking vigorous field notes in such a small, intimate meeting, I jotted down some questions and notes in my own copy of the workbook. Why had the author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*, a woman, chosen to represent Eve in such a negative light? Why were the twelve women in the room enthusiastic about this representation of Eve?

The *Bad Girls of the Bible* study questions also asked women to connect Eve's experience to their own lives. One section asked readers to look at Genesis 3:6, "the very point where Eve could have stopped herself, but didn't."<sup>136</sup> The book inquired, "Been there? How do you feel when you don't stop?"<sup>137</sup> Nina, a middle aged woman with confident voice and curly brown hair raised her hand to respond to the question. Sometimes she wants something, she said, but she can hear God telling her not to do it. She gestured vibrantly, pulling her head back and shaking her finger to show God making commentary on her choices. Even though she could hear "Him" so clearly sometimes, she said, sometimes she goes ahead and does whatever any way. Afterwards, she feels awful and regrets her choices. The other women nodded in agreement, suggesting they had similar experiences—perhaps during their work in the sex industry, or outside of it. The next question in the workbook asked the women "and how do you feel when you *do* manage to control that urge to sin?" "Empowered and holy" another woman responded.

As I looked around the room, I realized that what might be considered an "anti-woman" reading of Genesis had radically different meanings for the women of the Ladies for the Lord. According to the church website, this ministry's goal was to reach out women who are working or have worked in the sex industry. The official purpose of

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<sup>136</sup> Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible Workbook*, 10.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

the group was not to force these women to convert or leave the business, but to minister to them and let them know that God loved them.

Different members of the Ladies for the Lord said over and over again in interviews and in meetings that they do not judge women in the sex industry. They articulated similar goals as the ones listed on their website which declare the ministry to be “without condemnation.” While ministering in strip clubs, they said that their main objective was to share God’s love, and to invite women to come to Haven Church if they would like to do so. Even though they said they were not trying to make women change professions, it was clear that they viewed activities inside strip clubs as less than holy. Throughout interviews, several women described the clubs either as “Satan’s playground” or “Satan’s territory.” The women generally seemed to understand the women working within the industry in one of two ways: either as victims who had gotten caught up in an evil industry, or women who were addicted to the money that came along with the work. For instance, three members, Carla, Katie and Megan, respectively articulated their ideas about women working in the sex industry as such:

The thing about anything with the sex industry is...each of these girls are broken so bad inside. Starting from when they are little girls. None of these girls grow up and say, “I know what I want to do, I want to be a prostitute.”

I think that [prostitution] demoralizes, it takes the value of a woman, it makes them into nothing. I could just see though [the Ladies of the Lord] the true stories of girls who have worked on the street. The girls who have been abused and how broken they are....some women are doing it for themselves, I’m not saying that they are not at fault. It just makes me sad to see what it does to them...they get sucked into the money so they can’t stop.

You feel sorry for them, you know the truth, how miserable it can be. Its dark.

Carla and Katie portray women working in the sex industry as both “broken” victims, who, due to their pasts, have begun to work in a career that is harmful and destructive. However, Katie’s words also indicate that she sees the sex work not just as victimhood,

but as immoral and wrong. Some women are “at fault” and “get sucked into the money.” Other members articulated similar ideas throughout meetings and interviews. During my research, I never once heard any member say that some women might enjoy sex work, or view it as a legitimate career.

In this context, perhaps seeing Eve as a sinner, and a fellow “bad girl” was a tool of empowerment for the women of Ladies for the Lord. Each woman who I interviewed admitted that they had sinned in their own lives. Other Christians and Christian groups criticized the work that the Ladies do; one website from another Christian describes the group as “imposters” and says they are “from hell.” Perhaps having a main character in Genesis who was also a “sinner” was not degrading, but reassuring. Perhaps here, scolding “Evie” asking her “what *were* you thinking” was not meant to demonize her, or even to blame her for the fall of humankind.

Indeed, judging Evie for her problems seemed to offer the women in this context a sense of agency and authority. Unlike Augustine of Hippo and earlier figures in Christianity, they did not necessarily point to women as a whole for causing the fall of humanity, but focused on this one individual who had “jacked it all up” for everyone. In this context, their own “sins” and missteps became less serious. Their problems were not necessarily their fault, but also the fault of that first woman who lived on the planet. “If Eve hadn’t sinned, there wouldn’t be any strippers, cause we’d all be naked all the time anyway,” explained one member.

Although they did not blame all women for Eve’s mistakes, they did connect her actions to their own experiences. Nina, for instance, looked back on a time when God had told her to stop her actions. She, along with other women at the meeting, openly admitted that she had sinned or made choices that she regretted. Eve had done the same

thing, though she was still loved and affirmed and cared for by God. As the women worked through this chapter of *Bad Girls*, they reflected on their paths, bringing together their past (or present) in the sex industry with their identities as Christians. They recognized that they had sinned, but affirmed also that they were valuable human beings who were working towards a relationship with Jesus. In a way, this reading was an expression of the belief in fluid submission that is held by the Ladies for the Lord. It was one instance where they recognized that individuals who had sinned could come back and become devout followers of God.

I needed to reframe my own lens to understand how the story was being read in this particular context. These women were not without agency because they were embracing what I understood to be a patriarchal reading of Eve, nor were they blindly ingesting oppressive images. Rather, this particular reading illustrates Foucault's relational web of power. These women were not merely legitimizing the top-down authorities in an andocentric culture. Rather, they utilized this particular reading to explain and understand their own lives and experiences, and reproduce and reshape certain ideals of sexuality. They drew on this version of Genesis to cultivate an atmosphere that was more accepting and open than other Christian groups.

#### *Submission to God and Empowerment in Day-to-Day Life*

Indeed, the interpretations of various biblical texts had complicated values for the women of Ladies of the Lord. In addition, the concept of "submission" had a variety of varied meanings for the group. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines the verb

“submit” as “to yield governance or control.”<sup>138</sup> In each one of the Christian communities that I researched, there were two main components of submission that were deeply intertwined: a woman was supposed to surrender to God and to her husband, if she was married. According to the women of Ladies for the Lord, submission was not just a way to operate in the world and interact with other human beings, but it was a way to connect and participate with something divine and greater than themselves.

Certainly, the woman I interviewed did not see submission as restrictive, but believed that it opened up possibilities for them. After the *Bad Girls* Bible study, I interviewed Elaine, one member of the Ladies for the Lord, as we drove together from a meeting to a strip club where the group would perform outreach. Elaine was an African American woman, with long, wavy hair with a few blond highlights. She wore heels and carried a giant Louis Vuitton bag, which she held on her lap as we talked. I felt awkward and underdressed next to her, and nervous about doing an interview while driving. As we made our way over slippery and wet high ways, Elaine articulated what exactly it meant to surrender one’s life to God:

That means to discontinue relying on my own strength to do everything....I used to be very impulsive, to do things. Now I sit back and I think. Should I do this? What is going to happen, if I make this decision? ....Not saying “I’m going to do this, I’m going to do that, I think that this is right.” [Surrendering means] relying on God fully.... listening to him and what he is trying to say to us.

Here, in a way, Elaine’s words reflect the opposite of Butler’s definition of agency and NOW’s call to action. Her statement stands in line with the dictionary’s definition of submission: she reports yielding control, and discontinuing “relying on [her] own strength.” Her statement could be read as an indication of passivity, a sign that she has

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<sup>138</sup>“Submit,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/submit> (accessed February 25, 2009).



given over control of her life to the “Him” whose existence cannot be proven. However, the concept of surrender had a deeper, more complicated meaning for Elaine. For her, submitting to God did not mean giving up her own agency and control in her own life. Rather, it meant bringing what she understood to be divine into a conversation about her actions, her plans and her feelings. Surrender was a part of personal reflection for Elaine, something she called on when she wanted to “sit back and think” on serious decisions in her own life. Instead of making her feel less powerful, submission made her feel that her decisions were more meaningful, and less “impulsive.” Submission in this context did not entail being compliant to men and other humans; rather it allowed Elaine to own her choices and feel backed up by something greater than herself. This use of submission does not necessarily oppress women, but allows them to be empowered, and feel their decisions and lives are backed by something all-powerful.

The belief in giving control to God also impacted the way the Ladies for the Lord do outreach in clubs. Every other week, small teams of women from the ministry travel to various “gentlemen’s clubs” with gift bags full of a pink Bible, make-up, toiletries, tank tops and lotion.

When I saw the Ladies for the Lord in outreach action, they approached each dancer with a gift bag, told them that God loved them and invited them to come to the Haven Church. Sometimes, though, they engaged the dancers with deeper conversations about spirituality and Christianity. During an interview, Carla described to me how she is obedient to God while doing this work. Though Carla thinks outright proselytizing is a bit forward, at times, she said, God asks her to ask a woman if she “knows Him.” She described what it sounds like when God speaks to her in such situations:

Well, as corny as it sounds, it’s that still small voice in my heart that doesn’t let me rest until I do what he said. Like when he said, “ask her” I was like, “I’m sure

he didn't say that." And it was like "no." He was like, literally, "you've been asking me what else can I say, what else can I do. I'm telling you, ask her if she knows me." Being obedient, you see, that's exactly what he was telling me to do....

Every night is different, because we don't have any idea what we are going to say to the girls. Everything is spirit led. We don't go in with, here is what I am going to say, I'm going to talk to this girl. We just really pray that the Lord directs us. Before we go out, we have our Bible study, we just get together and pray before we go into the club. We do in with our gifts, and we pray that the Lord brings girls to us.

Though Carla describes God's voice as "still" and "small," it is also unavoidable and repetitive. It "doesn't let [her] rest" until she does what "He" wants. God's voice speaks like a nagging parent begging her daughter to finish her chores. Carla elaborated that God speaks in this way to the group. They do not explicitly plan their trips, but rather, their outreach is "spirit lead." However, to Carla, submitting to the word of God was not a kind of oppression; nor did she feel like she was under autocratic control. Rather, she felt she was giving over control of outreach to something bigger than herself. For Carla, this position did not debase her work, but rather, it seemed to give it more meaning. Carla was not negotiating her own agency by surrendering control to something else, rather, she believed she could take more meaningful, important action by involving something higher. Carla's submission here was also distinctly different than Elaine's. While Elaine talked about submitting to God, it seemed to be a time when she sits back and reflects, for Carla, God's voice spoke quickly from moment to moment, interrupting what she thought to be her own logic.

The idea of submitting to God in day-to-day life is not just isolated at the ministry of the Ladies for the Lord, but widespread throughout the Haven Church community. In order to understand the wider rhetoric of submission, I met with Faye, who runs the women's ministry at the church. We met at a coffee shop in the late morning, right after she had finished with a long workout at the gym. She was athletic,

middle-aged and blond, and wore her gym clothing and a ponytail. She answered all questions in great detail and spoke with a husky, soft voice. Later that evening, I would get to see another side of her, as she led hundreds of Christians at the Haven's women's ministry. This was a distinctly different group than the Ladies for the Lord—although some of the Ladies said that they occasionally went to the ministry, I did not see any members at the meeting the night when I attended.

About 200 women were present at the meeting, which took place in a large meeting room at the church. The women sang soft-rock worship music together for about twenty minutes, and then a middle aged woman opened the meeting, welcomed new comers and declared that there “is nothing like being with your sisters!” At one point in the talk, she pointed at Faye, who was seated in the first row, and asked everyone to give her a round of applause for her work as the group leader. Faye merely pointed up at the ceiling, indicating that her work was not her own, but God's. Later on, when she addressed the whole group, she that “a student” had talked to her that morning about her teaching process. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat in the back. Faye explained that she considers herself to be unworthy of teaching, but God tells her how to run lessons. During our interview, she had articulated this process this way:

Sarah: When you are preparing for a lesson, how do you go about preparing?

Faye: Well, prayer is what I depend on more than anything. Praying and speaking to the Lord. You always ask the Lord. Our church is so diverse, in ages in ethnic groups. I always just ask the Lord, what is it that our women need?

What do you want to say from your heart to their heart? I pray, and then I sort of get confirmation.

On one level, Faye may seem to be surrendering control and denying herself agency or credit for the work that she does. During the women's meeting, she went as far as to deny that she had any capability to create a lesson on her own. Yet, simultaneously, she was giving herself much credit for her work. By declaring that she can “pray” and “get

confirmation,” she identified herself as someone who can be in full communication with a divine, omnipotent being. The words that she speaks at the women’s meeting are not her own; but they are tools of something greater. Indeed, with the help of God, she asserts that she has the ability to break through barriers along the lines of ethnicity and age. In her work, Saba Mahmood argues that Egyptian Muslim women may assert themselves in their own communities through modesty.<sup>139</sup> By pointing at the heavens while hundreds of women clapped for her, Faye did something similar.

This kind of analysis may be dangerous for an ethnographer or for an academic student. Obviously, in a non-theological thesis at a secular school, I am not at liberty to argue if there is a God, and if s/he is actually speaking to Carla, Faye, or other women at the Haven Church. However, I can say that the spiritual activity of consulting with God and submitting to “Him” has serious meaning for the women I interviewed. Even if I had trouble fully conceiving of what it might mean for a higher power to “speak” to Carla or Elaine; it seemed that “taking time to talk to God” was at least an important time of meditation and reflection. It did not entail passivity, but rather seemed to be a form of empowerment. It did not deny women agency, but gave their actions and words greater weight and importance.

#### *Gender Roles and Submission to Spouses*

For the Ladies for the Lord and other women of Haven Church, submission to God was deeply intertwined with submission to spouses. Women explained that submission is not necessarily as a top-down dictatorial structure, but it is a kind of partnership. Ideally, they told me, the wife and the husband have mutual respect for

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<sup>139</sup> Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent,” 212-217.

each other that provides a perfect structure for raising the family. However, most of them also said that the husband is the one who has more responsibility, and the one who makes final decisions in difficult situations. Their beliefs in submission were deeply intertwined with reverence for traditional gender roles. Faye explained this concept to me in greater detail.

Along with running the women's ministry, Faye taught several classes on marriage, and did couples counseling with her husband. She described submission in the marital context in this way:

Well, I think the world and even the church has misunderstood the term submission. Before it tells women to submit to their husbands it says that we are to submit to one another. To me, submission is what I want to do. If we follow God's outline in the Bible, he does say that men are to be the head of the wife. It is just a position; it doesn't mean one is better than the other. It's just a line of authority. In case he gives the man a huge responsibility, and God holds him accountable. And if our husbands follow the word, they love us to lay down their life for us. If they're doing their role, then there is no problem.

I would definitely want to submit to my husband. But submit isn't like what I think people see it, like a husband domineering, putting their son down. A husband always seeks advice for his wife. But in the end for me, if my husband and I have a disagreement about something, I would submit to what he decides. But I also believe he has that huge responsibility and accountability to God, that God holds him accountable as the head of the family, the priest of the family, but, I've been blessed because my husband, he loves me and supports me. I have that, so I have no problem following his lead.

Here, Faye showed how submission relates to the sort of divine relationship described in the earlier section. Faye saw God playing an important role in her everyday life and her work planning lessons and counseling couples. In addition, Faye also followed the ideal of submission in her marital life. She described her family as a hierarchy with God at the top. God held her husband "accountable as head of the family" and "priest of the family." Ultimately, she gave him the agency to make important decisions. Though he sought her advice and she gave it, he was the one who has more responsibility to God. Although she did not have as much agency as he did, Faye felt that her position was just

as important as his. Just as she saw God influencing the way that she ran ministries at Haven Church, she saw God playing a role in the way her marriage functions. With this point of view, being “below” the head of her husband could be seen as empowering or ideal, and a way to fit into the divine order.<sup>140</sup>

Faye’s points of view on submission in marriage echoed throughout interviews with other women at the Haven Church and members of Ladies for the Lord. Indeed, women from this ministry also indicated that God had meant for women to submit to their husbands. Megan is one of the founders of Ladies for the Lord. She was very receptive to my research, and key to helping me meet other women and make contacts. On my second visit to her region, Megan met me at a train station, took me to have a Mexican lunch. She wore a bright blue blouse, a white skirt and Roberto Cavalli heels.

Like many of the women of the Ladies for the Lord, Megan spent several years working in the sex industry. At the time of our interview, she worked in auto advertising. Megan had recently gotten married, and was raising her son with her new husband. Her articulations about the ideals of marriage were quite similar to those of Faye:

I definitely feel like men are called to be leaders. I think they are given a very great responsibility, to be Christ-like in their relationships and in their actions. And I believe women are called to serve their men. We definitely have very distinctive roles. And I think that we are straying so far away from God’s design for us, that’s why there is so much divorce, chaos, disorder so to speak.

Here, Megan articulated more “traditional” beliefs on marriage that are similar to those of Faye. Like Faye, Megan believes that there is a hierarchy within marriages that is set up by God. Men are at the top, and women are called to serve them. Megan also believed that God’s plan was uniquely heterosexual. Later in the interview, Megan

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<sup>140</sup> This particular theology of “headship” could emerge from this verse from the Bible: “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” Corinthians 11:3, (New International Version).

elaborated about her beliefs on gender differences: “God created her the softer one, the sweeter one, the more nurturing and loving one. Men were built with more muscles for a reason.” However, she also emphasized that both roles were “equally important jobs.” It would be easy for feminists to pick apart Megan’s definition of marriage, and argue that the “roles” that she describes are not biologically fixed, but socially constructed and performed. Nonetheless, it is important to examine why these roles were important and compelling for Megan. She understood the heterosexual family unit to be designed and ordained by God. For her, serving men was not a form of oppression; rather, it was way to be closer to what she believed to be God’s perfect model for humanity.

Katie, another member of the Ladies for the Lord, had never worked in the sex industry, but she had been a dedicated member of the ministry for several years. When I met Katie for an interview, she was stylishly dressed in jeans and a pink hoodie. She articulated to me that heterosexual marriage was ideal as we had coffee before a worship meeting:

Well, in marriage, the Bible refers to the relationship between a man and a woman—a man is Christ, and the woman is the Church. The Bible refers to that, Christ died for the church, so, if a husband dies for the wife, and then the church serves Christ. You go by that example in a marriage relationship, then it’s a solid foundation. The man is dying for the woman, serving her, and she is serving him.

Here, Katie describes a hierarchy that shows how submission to God is parallel with submission in marital relationships. She, like Joan in the last chapter, references Ephesians 5.25, a verse that reads “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”<sup>141</sup> This verse compares the man in a heterosexual

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<sup>141</sup> In a later e-mail correspondence, Katie asked me to include the whole of this verse in my paper. I agreed to footnote it: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for

marriage relationship to “Christ” and his wife to the “church.” In this way, submission in marriage and traditional gender roles become linked to the divine. Women reported that they had a personal, direct relationship to God, and in addition, by cultivating a certain form of marriage, they believed that they could get even closer to “Him.” Katie compares this kind of relationship to the center of Christian faith, Jesus’ death for the sins of the world.

There were several other reasons why women might promote this framework besides it being a way to connect with God. Many of the women at the Ladies for the Lord were dealing with burdens and worldly problems. Megan’s job was on the line due to the economic recession, and she was trying to figure out how to best live in her life in the context of her new marriage. She described her situation like this:

I’ve been crying every day about my job. I have one foot in, one foot out. I’m trying to hold onto this career until it’s over, making the transition to where I know I want to be but I’m not sure I’m ready yet, you know? To let go of what the world thinks is successful. I’m making that transition over into hanging onto my man, letting him be the breadwinner....I believe that God is gently nudging me into this. Cause, I made a lot of money, more than my husband, and now my paycheck is diminished. I’m having to spend more time at home, not being able to pay my bills like I used to, my husband is having to cover. Its like, it is a spiritual battle, I think.... For me to fully be able to surrender—not only to God, but to my husband, who is pretty much in control. So yea, its tough. And the whole world tells you differently. What are you doing, you’re failing at your job! But maybe I’m acquiring skills that I need to deal with what I think God’s taught me to deal with, to take care of my family, to be there.

Megan believed that God is the one who designed heterosexual marriage, and for her, following a model where a wife submits to her husband was a way to follow a divine plan. She wanted to make a transition out of being the “breadwinner,” and believed that God was pushing her in this direction as well. In addition, for Megan, following her husband was also a way to survive the current economic crisis. Instead of panicking that

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her.... For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." Ephesians 5:22-25, 31, (New International Version).



her “paycheck is diminished” Megan could see her current financial troubles as a way to be closer to God’s plan. In fact, Megan framed conforming to a patriarchal marriage structure as a form of resistance to the rest of society. The “whole world” was telling her that she was failing because she was having trouble holding onto her job and letting go of being in the working world. However, as a Christian, she could choose to see this event differently.

### *Submission to God and Standards of Sexuality*

Indeed, the beliefs in submission to God and to the husband also impacted how women at the Haven Church understood gender roles and dynamics within marriage. In addition, to fully submit herself to God, a woman had to follow certain standards for sexuality. The women of the Ladies for the Lord believed that God had a plan for separate, distinct gender roles for men and women, and “He” also had rules for the appropriate and correct time to have sex.

Shannon was another member of the Ladies for the Lord. I met her one sunny January afternoon at a Starbucks. Shannon had never worked in the sex industry, but had been a committed member of the ministry for almost a year. She was a tall woman who wore a funky blue shirt, a beaded necklace and a little bit of make-up. Her gray hair was styled with some gel.

Shannon did not go on outreach trips to strip clubs, but instead, wrote “web love letters” to adult entertainers who advertised on Craigslist. About once a week, she logged onto her computer and visited the erotic services listings of the website. She replied to women who had posted advertisements for sexual services, and wrote them e-mails inviting them to the Haven Church. She was also an aspiring children’s author,

and was planning to write a book for young women called “Dying for Sex.” Her sexual ethic was based on the idea that Christians should submit themselves and their bodies to God:

The idea I have is, that we as Christians say that we belong to God. And if we belong to God then it all belongs to God. As a woman, then, as a young girl, your virginity belongs to God. Its not yours to just give away. That’s the premise of it. God is setting out rules for our protection. Its not necessarily limiting us to say, well....I don’t want you to have fun, I don’t want you to enjoy all these things...once you get into a sexual relationship, you’re putting yourself as risk. Pregnancies. Are you prepared to decide what to do? Are you prepared to be a mother? Are you prepared to make that decision? Are you prepared to consider adoption? You’ve got all these different types of diseases. You’ve got AIDS.

Shannon believed that women did not own their own bodies, but rather, they were objects that belonged to God. This viewpoint is related to the ideals of submission: women should not only surrender to God when making decisions about their lives, but they surrender ownership of their body to “Him” as well. This perspective informed her ideals about the ethics of sex. If a woman’s body belongs to God, so does her sexuality. When a woman has sex with someone else, she is sharing something that is not hers. Shannon believed that women are also putting this body, which she believes is divine property, at risk for worldly perils, including unplanned pregnancies and disease. Indeed, for her, the belief in God’s ownership of the female body related to a strict set of rules for sexuality. Shannon believed that sex should only happen within the framework of heterosexual marriage, which she saw as God’s divine plan.

However, Shannon did not believe that sexuality should be sterile, but rather, she wanted to acknowledge and celebrate that it could be a pleasurable, spiritual experience in the “right” context. She believed that women should not “share” sexuality with everyone, since God was the one who actually owned it. However, when a couple did have sex in the marital context, their act becomes a celebration of God. She

described to me how sex could be fantastic and even divinely inspired as we continued to sip our tea:

Well, part of it, I really spend a lot of time just studying the beginning. Because that's when it was perfect between Adam and Eve. It really hit me that there wasn't any shame there. That God was living among them. If God was among them, and they were naked, and there is no shame, then that's really, I think the church needs to say that that's really the best plan. And that, as a church body, as Christians, we need to say, "we've got the best sex."

Shannon contends that in the garden of Eden, sexuality was fantastic. Adam and Eve had a "perfect" relationship that was designed and put into place by God, and there was no shame in expressing their feelings for each other. According to Shannon, this dynamic transfers to all Christians who wait until the correct context for sex. She believes that sex in a Christian, marital context is better than any other kind on this planet. Following God's plan does not make sex worse; rather, it makes it amazing in the right context: so amazing that Christians should advertise it in order to recruit followers.

Shannon's interpretation was not unique. All of the other women from Haven Church articulated similar beliefs throughout interviews. At meeting where the Ladies for the Lord used *Bad Girls of the Bible* to discuss Genesis, Carla offered a comparable explanation about the rules of sex using Genesis, and the group seemed to embrace it and agree with it. However, although the rules on sexuality were strict, there were spaces within the group where the rules could be broken without serious consequences or harsh judgment.

### *Flexible Sexualities*

Indeed, within the Ladies of the Lord, the rhetoric of submission engendered certain frameworks for sexuality and gender, but it also created a space where these

frameworks could be broken. Within this specific ministry, submission was not understood to be an act that an individual performs once. Rather, surrendering to God was generally understood to be a long process that would ebb and flow throughout a woman's life. When a woman chose to submit to God and dedicate her life to Christ, it did not necessarily mean that for the rest of her life a woman would follow all the "rules" regarding gender and sexuality. When a woman did violate the rules, she had the space to repent to Christ, and recommit to living a life with Jesus. When a woman was in the process of violating the rules, there was an understanding that she could always come back to God, and "He" along with the rest of the group, would forgive her.

During our second interview, Megan took me on a drive around her city and told me about her personal conversion story. When she was growing up, Megan was a "nerd" in high school, studied hard and made straight A's. Then, she told me, "something happened" and she "had to make up for lost time" of being a "good girl." At 21, she became unexpectedly pregnant with her son. She married the father, but the relationship did not work out. She found God for the first time while going through her difficult divorce. Concurrently, she began dancing at a strip club to make money to support herself and her son. While starting to work in the sex industry, she remained a committed Christian who was "fired up about the Lord." However, Christian women who had supported her through her divorce proceeded to judge her for working as a dancer. Megan began to feel distanced from her faith.

Megan continued working in the sex industry, and eventually she moved to Vegas, where she became an escort. Although she could not say exact names, she said that she had several famous actors, athletes and politicians as her clients. She also had sexual relationships with other women, explaining, "that was part of this business...if

you were bi or liked women, you made extra money.” During her most lucrative time working in the sex industry, she was making around \$30,000 dollars a month, supporting her siblings, driving a Corvette, living in an upscale condo, and sending her son to a private school.

Megan cited several instances where God had personally intervened in her life throughout her twenties, and tried to turn back towards “Him.” Once, she was sitting in hotel room, when she received a phone call from a family member who asked her what she was doing to herself. She believed this was a signal that it was time to quit “the business” and live her life as a Christian dedicated to “Him.” Another member of Ladies for the Lord told me another element of Megan’s conversion story. After walking out of a casino one night in Vegas, Megan decided that she was going to leave the industry for good. This was a difficult decision, as she was nearly broke at the time and still supporting family members. However, on her way out, Megan found a poker chip on the floor. She cashed it, and its value of \$5,000 was enough to momentarily support her family while she stopped working as an escort. She also understood this event to be a sign from God.

Megan was quite open about sharing her life story with me; and it was clear that she spent several years living without following “God’s plan” for sexuality. However, Megan did not make one clear cut from her work in the sex industry to a Christian life. Rather, her conversion narrative was a long process. In her story, God intervened in her life several times, starting in her early twenties, and continuing to this day. I asked her if she considered her moment in the hotel room a “second conversion” since she had already found God once in her early twenties. However, she categorized the event in this way:

I re-dedicated my life. It's hard to do that. I would stick with God for a little bit, and then I would go back and do my own thing. I kept coming to God over and over again. "I'm so sorry God, I'm so sorry." I asked Him, how many more times do I get to be sorry like this? I just got fed up with myself. You know what I mean? I was making a mockery of God. I knew he was standing there the whole time, but I kept running away.

Here, Megan explained that surrendering to God was not one irreversible act; rather, it was a long, difficult progression. Throughout her twenties, she had a dual identity, as a woman who worked in the sex industry, and a Christian. She maintained this identity through a belief in a God who always forgives, even after a woman has made a "mockery" of Him. Though Megan had left the sex industry, and did not want to go back, submission took constant work and vigilance. "Every day" Megan explained, "you lose touch with God. You get caught up in the world, caught up in your business."

Megan articulated traditional beliefs about gender and sexuality, and indicated that she thought God had a set of rules for how men and women should live and have sex. However, she also generally understood that these models will not always be followed, especially among her friends, who Megan jokingly described as "heathens."

Megan and I talked about the difficulties of following the exact rules as we drove:

Sarah: Do you ever think about if there are Christian women who believe strongly in waiting until marriage for sex, do you ever think about what its like for those women if they don't find anyone? If they don't find anyone, period? Have you ever met anyone like that?

Megan: No, I don't know anyone who hasn't already violated that code, to be honest. I mean, have you?

I asked Megan how women could cope if they never found anyone to marry throughout their whole lives, but wanted to wait to have sex until marriage. Instead of offering insight into what this situation might be like, Megan merely said that she had never met anyone who had not "violated that code."

Certainly, this brief conversation offered some valuable insights into conceptions of sexuality at the Ladies for the Lord. God's model for sex within marriage was the

recognized ideal. However, in practice, people like Megan understand that many people will not follow this model. Conforming to the ideals of gender and sexuality was important, but striving towards these ideals was what really mattered. Perfection did not have to be attained, just as long as individuals were genuinely trying their best. Even after mistakes, Megan believed God would always pardon sincere Christians and takes them back. The belief in God's forgiveness, and the fluid nature of submission allows women like Megan to reconcile their pasts in the sex industry with their presents and futures as Christians. This explains what may seem like a paradox from the outside: and demonstrates how former and current sex workers can also identify as women of faith.

Indeed, women within the group could find acceptance and community, even if they were currently not following God's set standards for sexuality. Josie, another one of the Ladies for the Lord, acknowledged that following the rules about sex could be difficult for a single woman. She explained that:

Of course, the Bible tells us that we should only have sex in marriage, and anything outside of that is fornication. I morally believe that. I'm not necessarily practicing that right now. I would love to wait a long time. I have actually waited a long time. That's what I'm going through right now. I've started sleeping with somebody.

Josie articulated similar ideals on sexuality as the other women in the group. Josie also explained that she desired follow these standards herself, and "wait a long time."

However, Josie she also shared that she wasn't following that standard at this moment.

At the Ladies for the Lord, this behavior was not idealized, but socially accepted and understood. Josie further explained her position and situation in e-mail correspondence. While I had originally written that Josie believed "it was difficult for a single woman to follow God's rules about sex" Josie elaborated:

I don't believe that it is difficult to follow God's rules about sex as a single Christian woman....When you do not arm yourself with God's Word, that is what makes it difficult to follow God's Word. Before I let myself fall I had no problem with staying celibate. I was relying on the strength of the Lord and had a very consistent relationship with Him. When you weaken that relationship and rely on your own will of course it is hard to follow any of God's rules, just one of those being sex. It is easier to fall into any temptation. I'm not saying to by relying on the Lord completely that we do not fall into sin, we all do no matter what, but it is so much easier to turn away from sin when you have a closer relationship with Him. I am working on rebuilding my relationship with Christ and through Him all of our challenges are much easier.

Here, Josie wanted to clarify some of her previous statements, adding that she believed it is not too difficult for a Christian woman with a strong relationship with God to follow the rules of sex. However, in tough times, it can be challenging to stick with God, and therefore not easy to follow "God's rules." Here, she too acknowledged that following the Lord is a life-long process that may ebb and flow depending on the circumstances of a woman's life. Individuals may have periods where they "rely on the strength of the Lord" and other periods where they "weaken that relationship."

It was unclear whether the women outside Ladies for the Lord and within the greater Haven Church community shared the belief in the idea of fluid submission. At times through out meetings, I heard members complain that other people at Haven Church judged them for their pasts and their history in the sex industry. Some church leaders that I interviewed seemed very supportive of the group and their way of operating. However, the first time I met Megan, she was flustered about a member of the church who found out that some members of the Ladies were not leading "sinless" lives. This member had called the head pastor to report the actions of these women.

On the other hand, Faye, the leader of the women's ministry, also seemed to believe that submission is not necessarily a one-time, irreversible action. She acknowledged that many people will not wait until marriage for sex, but highlighted



that these people can still have committed relationships with God. It becomes evident fairly often that not everyone has followed God's rules in her courses on marriage:

At the [Haven Church] when you want a [Haven] pastor to marry you, you have to go through a pre-marital course and get approved by the teachers. And then, to even get enrolled in the class, you have to sign a purity statement. To be real truthful, almost every couple, its very rare, we do have a few couples, but most couples will admit that they have had, or are having pre-marital sex. And what we say is, [the head pastor] says it all the time from the pulpit. You may have had whatever, but from here on out, from now until you are married, you make a commitment and a covenant with God that you will stay sexually pure until marriage. So they have to sign it and they have to get witnesses and every week in our class we ask them how are you doing? Cause we want to hold them accountable.

Here, Faye described the process that young men and women must follow in order to be married at the church. The church did have a set of social standards and moral rules, and tried to encourage youth to conform to them before officially sanctifying their relationship. However, at the same time, Faye shared that most people have not kept to those rules. In fact, it was "very rare" to find a couple that has not had sex before marriage. Though the head pastor preached that people should stay chaste until they are wed, it was a constant possibility that people might not be doing so. Faye had to check in with members every week to see if they have followed the rules, even though they had signed a "purity pledge." Although the rules on sex at the Haven may seem to be set in stone, in reality, there was some acknowledgement that the rules would not always be followed, and acceptance for those who have broken them. If a couple wanted to recommit and resubmit to God, after having "sinned," they could do so and find acceptance in pre-couples marriage counseling.

### *(Sub)Missions and Strip Clubs*

The belief that submission to God was a long, continual process affected the outreach work of the Ladies for the Lord. In contrast to the stereotype of Christians

who tell sex workers that they are going to hell, this group did not forcibly push dancers to repent and give up the job where they were using their sexuality outside the “Godly” framework. Rather, the Ladies for the Lord took a less aggressive approach, which numerous members described as “non-judgmental.” The actions of the Ladies for the Lord did indicate that they wanted women to leave the sex industry and turn to God, and the Ladies believed that a gradual, non-confrontational approach was ultimately more effective and Christ-like.

I attended outreach with the Ladies the night after the Genesis Bible study. After driving through some complicated, twisted high ways, while interviewing Elaine, we arrived at a small, unassuming building just off an exit. After a few minutes, several other cars full of members of the Ladies pulled up into its gravel parking lot. Two Ladies decided to wait outside the club and pray, and Carla pulled out about ten gift bags from the back of her car and gave them to Megan and Elaine. I had an awkward moment debating if I should ease Carla’s load and offer to take one of the bags, and in the end I decided not to do so. I walked with them up to the entrance of the club, which was covered in thick rubber strips. Megan explained to the burly bouncer that they wanted to give some gifts to the dancers, and he nodded and let us in.

That night the music was blaring but the business was slow. The main room of the club had a small stage with a pole in the middle, surrounded by a bar where people could sit and have drinks. Around the bar, there were several rows of fluffy couches. The floor was red velvety carpet. One woman was dancing on the pole, and two customers watched her. Another woman lounged on one of the couches, and then five or six other women stood around, waiting for customers. They all wore bikini-like outfits and thick make-up.

The Ladies for the Lord approached each woman, said they were from Haven Church, and offered a gift bag that contained a pink Bible, tank-tops, nail-polish, and other items. Over all, the dancers that night did seem interested in the gift bags and open to speaking to the Ladies. One woman in blue lingerie told us that she went to the Haven Church every week. Another woman with blond, chunky highlights commiserated with a member of the Ladies about how pole and “floor work” (dancing on the knees) gave her bruises on her legs. As we left, I noticed two women who sifted through the gift bags to examine the various content, and pulling out the pink tank tops and lotion inside. Once again, these were only my brief impressions from one visit, and obviously, reactions to the group are surely complex and varied.

Throughout interviews, group members explained the approaches that they took to their outreach. Megan believed that leading by example was the best way to encourage other women to turn towards Christianity. She described her proselytizing style in this way:

I'm not going to go out and push that down someone's throat. "You are going to hell! You have got to repent!" No! How about we show people with our actions, and our love, and let them go, "wow, what does she have that I don't have?" That's the best testimony right there. By your actions, your love...you are going to get more response that way. People are going to be more curious as to what you believe in, what you stand for, when you are grateful about it.

Here, Megan distanced herself from Christians who take militant and aggressive approaches to converting other people. Rather, her method was more gradual and slow moving. She sought to be an example of what life could be like with Christian faith.

With “her actions” and “her love” she tried to cultivate curiosity among non-believers.

She went on to compare finding Jesus to choosing a life partner:

I feel like your relationship with Christ is the single most important relationship in your life. And just like any relationship we have, we go through courtship we go through getting to know the person. We go through background checks. It's the same thing with Christ, you know? We're devoting

our lives to him. If you are going to make a huge commitment to devoting your life to someone, you have to know why you are doing that, if they can be trusted. It's the same thing with God. We just provide a place where we can hear someone who has more experience with that relationship with Christ. Let them take their walk on their time at their level. We are here to nurture that. You know? We can't judge that. We can't say you're not far along enough, you are not faithful enough, you're not holy enough. Who are we to say that?

For Megan, coming to Jesus was not like experiencing epiphany or falling instantly in love, but rather, it was a long progression involving multiple steps: "getting to know the person," "courtship" and even "background checks." Though she believed that working in the sex industry is harmful to women, she said she wants to let people take their own "walk" without judging.

Shannon had a similar approach in her efforts to help people turn to Jesus. She too distanced herself from people who were judgmental and while proselytizing:

You hear a lot of people say, "you can't, you're a prostitute, you can't go to church. You gotta stop [sex work]." Well how is she going to stop? Its really God who is going to tell her, I love you. And then she is going to give her life over. She is going to say, I want to please the Lord. And this is not pleasing, and that is when she stops.

Here, Shannon's beliefs in submission informed two aspects of her outreach. First, she indicated that she, as a person, was not fully in control of the outreach. She alone did not have the agency to convince women to stop selling sexual acts. From her point of view, it was useless to say "you gotta stop" because ultimately, "it is really God" who would show love to each individual sex worker. So, Shannon said that she avoided making such judgments herself, claiming that God would ultimately be the one to stop sex work. In addition, like Megan, Shannon also believed that coming to God will be a multi-step process. First women have to accept God's love, and then give their lives over. They can only stop when they realize their work is not pleasing to God. Because of these two sets of beliefs, Shannon never tells women "you can't go to church" if they

are sex workers. Rather, she seeks to tell women that God loves them, and surrenders the rest of the process to what she understands to be a divine power.

Though some of the group leaders said they are not trying to get women to leave the sex industry, this did seem to be an implicit goal of the group. Megan's personal conversion story that she shared links leaving the sex industry with conversion to Christianity and true acceptance of God. Shannon wants women to get to the point where they will "please the Lord" and "stop" what they are doing. These women constantly described their acts as "non-judgmental" and said they were not out to tell women to leave, but just to say them that God loved them. Yet it seemed they did desire women to leave the sex industry, which they consistently characterized as negative, destructive and harmful. The story of Amanda, once described as a "poster-child" of the group, also ended with her eventually leaving the industry.

### *Finding Acceptance and Support*

I was not able to interview sex workers on the receiving end of the Ladies for the Lord work, but I did interview Amanda over the phone. Amanda had found several benefits while joining the Ladies of the Lord. She had not been happy working in the sex industry, and gained community and spirituality when she joined the ministry. In addition, after she decided to leave her job, Amanda received financial support, and help finding other work from the Ladies. The group's belief in a fluid submission allowed Amanda to become a part of it, and benefit from being a part of their community before she officially stopped dancing.

In a phone interview, Amanda told me about her experience leaving the sex industry and joining the ministry group. Amanda was born into a Jewish family, and

began dancing at a club when she was twenty-two. Her own descriptions of the sex industry matched the way that the group described it as a whole. She said she chose to start dancing because she was “really broken.” She also stated that her past history of sexual abuse as a child influenced her initial career choice. Amanda also described her years dancing as a negative and difficult experience. The money was good, but the job was demanding and emotionally draining. “I got to the point where I just felt so heavily convicted” Amanda explained. “I was surrounded constantly by evil.”

To do this day, Amanda does not like going back to clubs, even for outreach, because, she explained “the reek of evil” and there is “nothing good there.” She said that there were no other community organizations reaching out to her, and few individuals, even in her family and friend group, offered her support. One day, Amanda was on the phone with her friend, Rob, crying because she did not want to go to work. He said to her, “whatever the situation is, you need Jesus.” She began going to church with him, and became a Christian on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Two weeks later, Amanda went back to work at a club because she needed the money. She recounted the story to me during our conversation on the phone: “It was the first day that I had gone back to work. I felt horrible, and thought now that I’m a Godly person I can’t go back to the club.” She said she felt “really nervous” “nauseous” and “sick of the whole situation.” She said a prayer, and five minutes later the Ladies for the Lord showed up to her club.

At this time, the Ladies for the Lord were doing their work “incognito.” Juliet, a member of the Ladies for the Lord, bought a lap dance from Amanda, and the two women went into a back room. Juliet gave Amanda \$20, but said that she did not want a dance. Instead, she offered Amanda a gift bag, told her that God loved her and invited

her to the Haven Church. Amanda began crying, and “took it as a sign that everything was going to be all right.”

Amanda began attending meetings at the Haven Church soon after she met Juliet at the club. She hadn’t been very involved in communities of faith before, and had believed that “religious institutions were highly hypocritical.” At the Ladies for the Lord, however, she found that “nobody there has that holier than thou attitude” but rather, they were “non-judgmental.”

One week she was sick of going into work. She invited Rob, and Trina, a member of the Ladies for the Lord, over for dinner. When they were there, she said, she “started bawling.” “I said, ‘I don’t want to go back to work’” Amanda recounted, “and Trina said “then don’t.” Trina and Amanda burned the clothing that Amanda used in her job as a stripper, and she has not worked in the sex industry since that night. After she came to a meeting and told everyone that she had stopped dancing, another member wrote her a check for \$5,000 dollars. Someone else helped her find the waitress job that she has now.

Because the Ladies for the Lord strive to take a “non-judgmental” attitude, and believe that submission to God is a fluid process, Amanda could keep dancing while she found community and spirituality at the group. She continued to work in the sex industry for a year, and maintained an identity as both a dancer and a Christian. In other religious groups where submission to God is considered a one-time, irreversible event, Amanda might not have been able to find acceptance and community. Eventually, she did stop dancing and working in the sex industry. However, Amanda felt that this decision was not forced on her the Ladies, but a change that she wanted and had initially

started herself. However, from the way other members talked about Amanda, it was clear that they were proud of their work and happy with where she ended up.

*(Sub)Mission Accomplished?*

Amanda's story is compelling, but surely, it is not necessarily representative of the way all dancers and sex workers feel about the Ladies of the Lord. I did not have time or resources to interview women at the clubs that the ministry group visits to see how they feel about the group and the outreach. During interviews, the Ladies of the Lord members emphasized over and over again that most dancers were very happy to see them and very receptive over all. And, as noted before, when I went on outreach with the Ladies for the Lord, the sex workers did indeed seem relatively accepting the group. However, while their conceptions of submission could allow the group to be more open and supportive to women who might be excluded in other Christian communities, their emphasis on God could have possibly created some limits on the work that they could do.

From interviews with some of the members of the Ladies for the Lord, I heard of a few cases where women were not necessarily receptive or happy to see them at clubs, and women advertising online were not receptive to e-mails from them inviting them to the Haven Church. Three different members of the Ladies for the Lord recounted these experiences in different ways:

And then of course there's girls who will pretty much tell us to f-off. You know? They don't want to have anything to do with us. Its fine, its to be expected.

We had this one night where these girls knew we were coming, or when they saw us there they knew who we were. And one came out, and she put a tag on her, she just made it. It said, "ask me if I know Satan." And another girl, wrote "Satan's girl" or something. It was very heart



breaking and sad. And then we, we went to another club...and the DJ played like “welcome to hell, 666.”

There were a couple people who were grateful. Other people [said] “who are these bitches?”

The Ladies for the Lord had a number of ways of explaining why some women might not like to see them. Some of them blamed the other Christians who are judgmental, who tell women that they must leave the sex industry immediately or go to hell. Other women explained the harsh responses by explaining that strip clubs were “Satan’s territory” and that Satan conspired to prevent their work.

Other women didn’t seek to fully explain the negative responses in worldly terms, but rather, used surrender to God in order to understand them. One member has gotten some “hateful kind of responses” but she believed that “the Lord is using that” and her work was important, even if the recipients to her outreach were not always receptive. She tried to “trust that the Lord is doing what he needs to do in their lives.” This member of the Ladies for the Lord did not seek to examine why she got negative responses from some women. Rather, she had faith that her work was part of God’s plan, and that “He” was taking control.

I do not mean to demean the experiences of the women at the Ladies for the Lord, and, after limited research, I am not in a position to judge their ministry group and the scope of their work as a whole. In most of this chapter, I have argued that the Ladies’ conceptions of submission to God allowed them to reach out to women who might not be welcome in other Christian groups, and allow acceptance for women who had not followed “God’s rules” of gender or sex. However, it seems that the group’s emphasis on submission could simultaneously limit their outreach and work. Although “trusting” and “speaking” to God seemed to be a meaningful part of reflection and

meditation for some women, for others, it could be a way to avoid confronting the conflicts that the group faces while doing outreach. It is possible that “listening to His word” and following the “spirit” took the place of considering what certain sex workers of their particular region need and want.

Women like Amanda who still worked in the sex industry could join the Ladies for the Lord and find spiritual fulfillment and emotional support. Over e-mail, I asked the group’s founders if sex workers who are not Christian had ever joined the group; and if it would still be possible for these workers to receive some of the other services that the group offers. Carla could not recall a non-Christian member wanting to join, and both founders said they would welcome any member into the group with open arms. However, the group’s emphasis on the Bible and submission to God might alienate some dancers. Though I was not able to speak to dancers (a major flaw of this project) it is easy to imagine that some of them come from other faith backgrounds and are not necessarily interested in joining this particular group. Though these sex workers may benefit from other services that the Ladies do offer—like help with resumes, community, and financial support— it would be difficult to access these services without sharing the community’s beliefs in God and Jesus.

On the other hand, sex workers who desire a spiritual community, but who do not wish to change their profession may also feel offended or alienated by the group. Though I was not able to interview the recipients of the Ladies’ outreach, I did speak to a sex worker from another city, Jocelyn. In order to respect the confidentiality of the Ladies of the Lord, I did not openly reveal which group I had researched, or where they were located. However, I did describe what the group did, and Jocelyn was familiar with

groups that do similar work, such as the Las Vegas group *Hookers 4 Jesus*, which has similar missions to the Ladies.<sup>142</sup>

Jocelyn was not turned off by groups like *Hookers 4 Jesus* because she did not share their religious beliefs. Rather, she also openly identified as a “born-again” Christian, attended church regularly, and listened to Christian rock. She also enjoyed working as a sex worker, which she did along with being an entrepreneur and running a small non-profit. She believed that Jesus was her savior, but did not see her work as against the Bible. She emphasized that the Bible’s particular rules on sexuality were created in ancient times when diseases were more rampant and more difficult to avoid. She pondered to me, “Now that we have better medicine, health care, hygiene practices, condoms, things like that...if this was around back then, would this be the same rule?”

The Ladies for the Lord repeatedly emphasized the sex industry was an evil and harmful place for women, and often used their personal experiences to illustrate this argument. Obviously, these experiences are valid, and represent their particular opinions about their work. However, these experiences are not necessarily representative of all the women in the sex industry. Numerous anthropologists and sociologists have shown that women have complicated experiences in the industry; and

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<sup>142</sup> Note, for instance, the similarities between this group and the Ladies of the Lord, from this quote from their mission statement on the website: “Our efforts include loving and accepting everybody, REGARDLESS of their past or current lifestyle and encouraging them to achieve their FULL potential! There will be no judgment. It is our heart’s desire that our friends that are working as sex workers would be released from their past and healed through a personal love relationship with Jesus Christ. To that end, we are committed to going wherever God leads us in order to bring freedom to those that remain in this lifestyle. Whether it be in the casinos, the street, the escort services, the strip clubs, the night clubs ... we are willing to go where no one has gone before to let them know that God loves them no matter what ... and that they can come to church to establish a true relationship with God, regardless of what current lifestyle they are living.” *Hookers 4 Jesus*, however, is more explicit about their goal of ending the sex industry for good. See: “About Us,” *Hookers 4 Jesus*, <http://www hookersforjesus.net/aboutus.cfm> (accessed March 15, 2009).

can view their work as empowering, degrading, or as a way to make a living.<sup>143</sup>

Jocelyn's experiences were far different than the way the Ladies tended to talk about it:

I am a nurturer at heart. I am involved in some counseling as well. That part of me comes out in my work. The clientele that I have drawn to me for some amazing reason are very like-minded, very spiritual, mostly married. They are looking for something more, passion wise. Older gentlemen, usually 45-65, who want someone to listen to them and give them attention and affection....I'm a really good listener, a counselor, I am very satisfied just being with them. If I were on an hourly basis, I don't think it would work that way. I'm more of a dinner date type of companion. During that time, it really is a whole lot of handholding, a whole lot of talking. I'm very inquisitive by nature, I love asking questions, hearing life stories. That's what I love about it. Its like being on a really great date. A really, really great date. I'm single as I said, and I can't even get a date as good as that in my single life. Those men treat me with more respect than the men that I date."

Obviously, neither the testimonies of the Ladies of the Lord or the testimony of Jocelyn encompassed the experiences of women in the sex industry as a whole. Jocelyn has a fair amount of control over her work—she set the parameters, and chooses to work on a nightly basis instead of an hourly one. She did not dance in public, but went on individual dates, and had a loyal group of regular clients. For her, the sex industry was not “Satan’s territory” nor was it a place where she felt exploited. She added later that many men contacted her through her blog, where she had written about her own spirituality. Often, during her dates with clients, she engaged them in long conversations about God. She saw her time working as a time for a meaningful, personal connection with other human beings. She had been doing sex work for over ten years, and said that she loved it and planned to continue doing it for a long time.

Sex workers like Jocelyn who enjoy their work may not respond well to the outreach like the kind that the Ladies of the Lord performs online or in strip clubs. Jocelyn was in a different city, and would have no way of contacting or knowing about

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<sup>143</sup> See Katherine Frank, *G String Divas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

the particular group that I researched. However, she did elaborate on her feelings on

Hookers 4 Jesus:

They are trying to help the person who is really down and out kind of thing. The person who feels outcast, worried, devalued. There are women out there who don't feel that way. Most of the women I know do not. We have other options. We could go on and do anything else. We're educated and pretty smart, I think.

Jocelyn said she would not be involved with a group like Hookers 4 Jesus, even though she is a committed Christian herself. While she did not hesitate to share her faith with others, she felt that it was inherently judgmental to do it in strip clubs while women are working. She would rather be involved with a group like the Sex Worker's Outreach Project (SWOP) that provides education and health services to sex workers.

Jocelyn did not speak for all sex workers, and acknowledged that not all women had experiences like hers, and that some women faced challenges and hardships while working. However, she believed that groups like Hookers for Jesus were limited in the productive work that they could accomplish. She explained that she would rather do outreach with other goals:

I'd rather educate them, help them.....I'm not going to push the whole Jesus loves you. Its one thing to invite someone, it's another thing to go into strip clubs. To me, that's almost offensive on both levels. It's offensive as a Christian doing that. Its offensive on both ends for me.

To Jocelyn, the work of the Ladies for the Lord was offensive on two levels. She felt that handing out Bibles was inherently assuming that sex workers were not on their own spiritual journey, and that they needed guidance from some other group who had the answers. In addition, though groups like Hookers for Jesus (and Ladies for the Lord) say they are not out to judge sex workers, Jocelyn felt judged through their representations of the sex industry as entirely evil and oppressive to women.

The Ladies of the Lord had a belief in a fluid submission that allowed them to be more accepting than many other Christian groups, and allowed women to violate some of the standards on sexuality and still find acceptance. Admittedly, I was not able to do research to see the full scope and impacts of their work within their community. However, it is necessary to note that while their belief in a fluid submission may allow them to be more open than certain other groups, there might still be individuals who they do not reach, and feel excluded by their messages.

### *Conclusions*

When I left my school for a few days to go do research with the Ladies, often my friends would ask where I was going, and I would respond that I was going to research Christians who worked with sex workers. I received responses that ranged from skepticism. “Christian sex workers?” one friend said. “Isn’t that a contradiction?”

From the outside, the Ladies of the Lord may indeed seem like a contradiction, just like the professional political women of the last chapter. The women in the last chapter smoothed over the contradictions in their lives with a belief that God had an individual plan for them. The Ladies of the Lord understood what may appear to be contradictions from the outside through their particular beliefs about submission and relationships with Jesus. For members, submission was not a form of oppression, as commonly believed, but a source of empowerment. By surrendering to God, they found a way to connect to something greater than themselves as they lived their day-to-day lives. Conforming to sexual standards and traditional roles within marriage was also an aspect of submission. However, at the same time, the Ladies for the Lord believed that submission to God was a long, fluid process. This belief informed their “non-

judgmental” approach to outreach at strip clubs; and it also meant that women who joined them could “sin” and still find acceptance in the group. That said, their particular approaches could still alienate some women.

Indeed, the women of the Ladies, as well the professional women, had unique ways of finding empowerment and community in their faith, even though they were not all conforming to the ideals that their traditions promoted. In the last section, I will jump back to the East Coast, and look at the unique way that women at the grassroots perform something similar.

## ***VI. Transcendence, Public Action and Passionate Prayer***

On a damp, hot, hazy Washington Friday afternoon, during the first week of my research, I decided to attend a prayer meeting at the Prayer House for Christ (PHC). I had met members of the PHC while they prayed for the end of abortion in public and a few of them had enthusiastically encouraged me to attend one of their prayer meetings, or “rumbles.” I didn’t quite know what to expect, and I arrived early, leaving plenty of time to locate the building and introduce myself to the people inside. I found the PHC on a corner downtown, above a bank, at the end of a strip of trendy bars and restaurants. I approached its simple, wooden door, and took a second to look it over and jot some notes. A paper sign on it read “Prayer House for Christ” and invited people upstairs. Another brass plaque indicated that offices of a policy research center shared the building. I opened the door and began walking up the creaky stairs, when I ran into a young woman wearing simple, loose clothing. Her head was shaved and she moved down the stairs quickly, skipping steps, and smiling at me as she passed.

“How funny” I thought to myself. I jotted in my notes: *could there be some sort of radical feminist group that’s also on the same floor as the conservative Christians?*



There wasn't, and I had been dead wrong about the young woman's political commitments. The rumble that night was different than anything I had ever encountered. The people of the Prayer House for Christ crowded into the small, pointed prayer room, facing a rock band that looked like a group from MTV. The band played loud, catchy music with easy, repetitive lyrics that would cycle through my head for the next few days: "*This is your city, king of glory, Washington DC!*" and "*I have a God who fights for me, its God who avenges me.*" Women who I had only met once came over to hug me and cute children handed out peanut butter sandwiches and lemonade. People prayed, danced and jumped up and down. Most of the crowd was under thirty, but there were also parents, toddlers and a few elderly folks.

That evening I also saw the same young woman from the stairs again, enthusiastically praying in tongues. This seemed to be a common activity throughout the Prayer House, and there was not one specific way to do it. Some women closed their eyes and spoke softly to themselves. Others curled up onto a ball, bowed down and shouted loudly into the floor. Sometimes friends laid hands on one another and spoke in tongues together, in pitches like they were having a regular conversation in a coffee shop, though in a language that I hadn't heard before.

Several people at the PHC were clean-cut, smiling and fresh like models in a catalog. I saw many young women my age with light make-up, feminine clothing, and beautiful long, straight, shiny hair. However, there were also several women there that night with shaved heads, and a couple of people with colored hair, funky clothing and tattoos. As they sang along with the music, some were quiet and reserved, others hollered loudly, moving their bodies in time with the music or pumping their fists in the air. Along with the men, women took the microphone at the front of the room to lead

prayer to God, or share their recent dreams and visions as the music played in the background. Nearly all the prayers asked God to end abortion and bring revival to America.<sup>144</sup>

Many academics have argued that varying forms of conservative Christianity are so successful in America because they provide people with simple, straightforward ways to understand the world and operate within society. Linda Kintz analyzes the literature of several Christian groups in her work *Between Jesus and the Market*, and contends that they engender followers and activists by presenting their agenda in soft, simple, and easy-to-digest packages that seem compassionate and loving.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, some of the literature from conservative Christian organizations provides a set of societal norms to make a confusing world seem clear-cut. For example, the huge Christian group Focus on the Family makes the complex subject of sexuality simple by dictating that there is only one proper way to be sexual (with a member of the opposite sex and inside marriage.)<sup>146</sup> Books that his organization recommends, like *Husbands Who Won't Lead and Wives Who Won't Follow* argue that women should follow more “traditional” models while operating within the family and within society.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Throughout my time at the PHC, prayers consistently asked God to bring “revival” to America. Several different PHC members had different definitions for exactly what revival meant. One young woman described it as “an outpouring of God” and went on to explain “What revival looks like, all that’s up in the air, we don’t know.” Others said they wanted another Great Awakening. “Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines “revival” as “a period of renewed religious interest” See “Revival,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revival> (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>145</sup> Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>146</sup> E.G., “God’s Design for Intimacy,” *Focus on the Family*, [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/sex\\_and\\_intimacy/gods\\_design\\_for\\_intimacy.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/sex_and_intimacy/gods_design_for_intimacy.aspx), (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>147</sup> James Walker, *Husbands Who Won't Lead and Wives Who Won't Follow*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2000).

However, on the ground, grassroots activists of conservative Christian movements may make spaces to go beyond these “traditional” roles for women. Like the high-powered women in Capitol Hill offices, and the Ladies of the Lord at the Haven Church, the women at the PHC have complicated ideas about women’s roles in the public sphere, and complex ways of enacting gender. I do not wish to suggest that these women were radical feminists or disciples of Judith Butler who consider gender a social construct. All the people who shared their stories with me believed that men and women are fundamentally and biologically different. Many of the women I spoke to planned to be mothers in the future, and dressed in “traditionally” feminine ways. However, at the same time, many women of the PHC were challenging conventional roles to an extent. Though they prayed for a “pro-family” agenda, they had traveled to a big city, and many of them were away from their homes and families. They were not always quiet and reserved, but active and vocal in their action for the pro-life cause. Some of them expressed their gender in dynamic, complicated ways: by shaving their heads or wearing more gender-neutral clothing. Though many of the women underlined that all women need a male guide, on occasion, women also led the men around them, instead of the other way around.

Although these women simultaneously embraced “traditional” gender roles while not necessarily conforming to them, it would also be too simplistic to label them as “hypocrites” or “confused.” Like the professional women, they too are protean selves, negotiating multiple layers of ideology to form their actions and opinions. Like the women from the Haven, they found empowerment and joy in submission to God. In addition, for these women occasionally transcended “traditional” gender roles through some of their religious practices and their public pro-life action. These religious and

political acts were their spaces of divine fluidity. Through praying in a spirit-filled manner and expressing their love to God, at times they stepped outside “normal” gender roles and typical behavior. Women also had the opportunity to move beyond “traditional” gender roles as they publicly demonstrated their pro-life beliefs through an activity that some called “protest” and others called “prayer.” In addition, a certain “counter-cultural” attitude prevailed among the PHC members, and they lived an unusual, austere lifestyle of community living and constant prayer. This lifestyle challenged notions of American capitalism and consumerism. Some of the women expanded this “counter-cultural” rhetoric to question widespread American gender roles, and to break these roles themselves. Indeed, some forms of conservative Christianity, such as the form I found at the Prayer House for Christ can simultaneously construct strict frameworks for gender, while making available languages and practices that allow people to occasionally transcend these frameworks.

Indeed, I noticed several occasions where gender at the PHC was not strict, but fluid. I do not know if members of the PHC would agree with this analysis, as many of them revered “traditional” roles for men and women. However, some of the actions, philosophies and rhetoric of this group reminded me of the actions of far-left, radical and queer activist groups that aim to transcend the normative cultural identity frameworks. I make this suggestion not to indicate the conservative Christians I met at the Prayer House for Christ are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. I did not ask about the sexual orientation or the sexual past of the people I interviewed, though sometimes it naturally came up during interviews. Nor do I wish to label their community as “queer;” to do so would be over simplistic, and probably insulting to all parties. Perhaps it is necessary to engage and discuss the history of this word before proceeding further.

### *Concepts of Queerness*

The word “queer” can be a derogatory word, used to insult or slander someone whose gender or sexuality does not conform to “normal” societal standards. According to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, “queer” literally means “strange or odd” and “variant from a conventional identity.”<sup>148</sup> However, in this paper, I draw upon the academic definition of queer. In recent years, certain postmodern scholars have re-appropriated the term, and recreated a more positive, dynamic meaning for it.

In this context, “queer” can mean to “challenge the very concept of normal” and it can include “a range of sexual acts and identities historically considered deviant.”<sup>149</sup> Queer theory is heavily tied to postmodern thought, which emphasizes that meanings and boundaries are not natural, but historically and socially constructed. For instance, as previously discussed, Judith Butler believes that individuals learn how to perform certain sexualities and genders. Labels like “man,” “woman,” “straight” or “gay” are not inherently natural, but are artificial categories that humans use to order the world around them.

In her essay “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” Butler responds to feminist critics who attack her for opening up the definition for the term “woman.” While second wave feminists generally want to keep the definitions of “woman” and “feminism” limited, Butler wants to expand them. She notes that there is already an overabundance of definitions for these terms. There are those who define women as childbearers because of their biological capacities. Others

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<sup>148</sup>“Queer” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/queer> (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>149</sup> Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 14. It is necessary to note that there is some hot scholarly debate about the exact meaning of this word. Some scholars only see it as a term which pertains to sexuality, while I am using it in a more general sense.

say that someone is a woman if she simply belongs to a “woman’s community.”<sup>150</sup> For Butler, the effort to limit the definition of “woman” is futile. Any universal conceptions of what constitutes “womanness” will inevitably exclude some group of people who self-identify as “woman.” The women who do not have children will be excluded from the “motherhood” definition, and the women who are not a member of a group of women are excluded from the “community” definition. People who identify as “women” but do not have the body parts typically associated with womanhood are excluded from the definition that stresses biological capacity.

Butler notes that wherever there is a foundation for a definition, “there will also be a foundering, a contestation.”<sup>151</sup> Like Butler, other queer theorists recognize that labels like “lesbian” and “gay” are limiting, and that a person’s gender and sexuality can shift and flow depending on context. These theorists advocate that we go beyond the binaries usually used for sexuality and gender, and that we are open to new languages and ways of operating within the world.

The concept of queerness may also extend beyond the realms of gender and sexuality and into the sphere of politics. Though theorist Michael Warner stresses that the concept of “queerness” emerged from movements for gay and lesbian rights, he also states that, “queer sentiment can be largely independent of queer sexual practice.”<sup>152</sup> Being queer is not just about deconstructing gender and sexuality, but it also

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<sup>150</sup>Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Routledge, 1995), 49.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>152</sup> Michael Warner, “Something Queer About the Nation State,” in *Publics and Counterpublics*, (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 222.

encompasses “demands that have to do with social and public life.”<sup>153</sup> William B.

Turner summarizes queer theory in this way:

“Rather than assuming identities grounded in rational, dispassionate reflection as the basis for scholarship and politics, queer theorists wish to ask how we produce such identities. Gender and sexuality are only two of the myriad elements that constitute a given individual’s identity.”<sup>154</sup>

Turner goes on explain that queer theorists may focus on upsetting categories of gender and sexuality, as these categories are the most deeply ingrained, and breaking them tends to create the most anxiety.

Warner argues that queer politics are fundamentally “anti-assimilationist, non-individualist.” Queer activists aim to resist the mainstream modes of operating, and stress that individual subjects are largely influenced by the societal structures around them. Warner writes that they utilize “non-communitarian practices of public-sphere media against both the welfare state and the normalizing idea of the social.”<sup>155</sup> These activists do not necessarily directly work with the state by lobbying or registering voters, as these methods of engagement legitimize normative societal structures. Rather, queer activists look for ways to ignite social and political change outside the typical avenues. Later, I will examine what these activists have in common with the people of the PHC. Indeed, although the word “queer” emerged from a struggle for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights, today the term’s meaning can be much broader. Sexuality is an important aspect of the concept of queerness; but many queer theorists and activists also wish to challenge the general ways that we categorize and understand the world as a whole.

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<sup>153</sup>Ibid., 221.

<sup>154</sup> William Turner, “Introduction,” *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>155</sup> Warner, “Something Queer About the Nation-State,” 221.

It may seem strange to look for parallels between queer movements and strands of conservative Christianity. In fact, conservative Christian organizations have spent considerable time and energy lobbying against the so-called “queer agenda.” One recent article from citizenlink.com, the action center from Focus on the Family, scoffed at a “Queer Prom” recently held in Chicago, quoting a policy director from Concerned Women for America who believes “homosexual activists are encouraging Latino teens who are questioning their sexuality to embrace their lifestyle.”<sup>156</sup> This policy director takes issue with an event where young people are encouraged to embrace non-normative sexuality and disrupt the heteronormativity of an American rite of passage.

Large-scale Christian organizations also may disagree with the queer/postmodern ideas that identity is constructed, malleable and fluid. For instance, last year, on their website, Focus on the Family posted the following thoughts on postmodernism:

Here at Focus on the Family, we understand the noun "postmodernism" to refer to a philosophy or mindset that rejects the value of rational thought, denies the existence of moral and spiritual absolutes, and affirms the right and power of the individual to invent his or her own "reality." This way of thinking is incompatible with the Christian perspective because it denies the existence of a truth that is valid for all people at all times. In other words, it rejects the claims of the Gospel on principle, without even granting it a hearing.<sup>157</sup>

Naturally, Focus on the Family is hostile to queer and postmodern theory. While their organization pushes for strict definitions and boundaries on marriage and gender, Butler and Warner deny that these definitions are divinely or even biologically ordained. Certainly, queerness may seem to be completely incompatible with Christian philosophy.

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<sup>156</sup> “Chicago’s ‘Queer Prom’ Targets Latino Youth,” *Citizenlink*, March 27, 2008, <http://www.citizenlink.org/content/A000007518.cfm> (accessed February 11, 2009).

<sup>157</sup> “Postmodernism,” *Focus on the Family*, 2008, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com> (accessed May 5, 2008).



In addition, the supporters of queer theory tend to be from liberal, leftist or secular backgrounds far from the conservative communities that I studied. However, the queer movement and Conservative Christianity, usually thought of as polar opposites, may have more in common than usually supposed. Scholar Michael Warner now identifies as a “queer atheist intellectual.” However, he also grew up in a right-wing Pentecostal household. He writes that when he reveals his background, “people often think I should have an explanation, a story.”<sup>158</sup> He writes that people like him, who “were found and now are lost,” have some “curious problems.”<sup>159</sup> People want a rationalization for what happened to his identity, why he changed; an explanation that will resolve the inconsistency of his seemingly contradictory life identities.

However, Warner shows us that queerness and postmodernism may actually share some commonalities with certain strands of “traditional” Christianity. Warner argues that although his Pentecostal boyhood may seem completely opposed to his current way of living, in fact, his religious upbringing prepared him for his life as a queer theorist and radical academic. Though he has gone through a significant personal identity transformation himself, he has been a part of two movements that are on the margins of mainstream society. Both movements see themselves as “oppressed minorities” and frame themselves as a group fighting the lifestyle of the majority.<sup>160</sup>

In addition, Warner points out that his particular Christian tradition, like the queer movement, recognizes that there are limits to the language and ways of operating which are commonly accepted in the secular world. Pentecostalism does not promote

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<sup>158</sup>Michael Warner, “Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood” in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Susan E. Henkling and Gary David Comstock (New York: Continuum, 1997). 221.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 230.

deconstructing limiting terms like “man” and “woman” but it “makes available a language of ecstasy” : spirit-filled prayer and speaking in tongues. Warner writes that within the tradition of his boyhood, “transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries of the self *can be seen as good things*” (emphasis his).<sup>161</sup> For Warner, spirit-filled-prayer is an activity that allows individuals to transcend normal, hegemonic day-to-day ways of operating. He writes that for some, this activity, which allows individuals to go beyond typical behavior, can “provide a meaningful framework for the sublime play of self-realization and self-dissolution.”<sup>162</sup> Ironically, Warner discovered his own queer identity through participating in the practices and rituals of his conservative tradition.

Tanya Erzen also draws on queer theory as she documents the sexual and religious conversions of ex-gay men in *Straight to Jesus*. Erzen argues that although these men are trying to enter a normative, heterosexual lifestyle, their identities continue to be queer after they complete New Hope’s program.<sup>163</sup> Erzen highlights the differences between the rhetoric of large-scale conservative Christian organizations, and the reality of life on the ground in smaller ex-gay communities. In national ad campaigns, powerful ex-gay associations like “Exodus” often claim that by participating in Christian programs, people can change their sexuality completely from homosexual to heterosexual. For instance, one advertisement from a group called Exodus advertisement shows a woman in wedding attire, with the caption “wife, mother, former lesbian.”<sup>164</sup> This ad perpetuates the idea that “homosexuality is a choice and that people can become married heterosexuals through accepting the tenets of the Christian

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 229

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>163</sup> Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 14.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 183

faith.”<sup>165</sup> The ideology of this ad stands in opposition to the idea of queerness, in that it sets up an identity binary. The text implies that people can be easily labeled “straight” or “gay” and switch from the later to the former by joining the Exodus program. This text presents no possibility for blurring in between.

However, Erzen’s ethnography demonstrates that the experiences of individuals at ex-gay centers are much more complicated. She argues that in centers such as New Hope, individuals undergo a “queer conversion” and assume an identity that is betwixt and between normative labels of sexuality.<sup>166</sup> They take on the identity label of “ex-gay” which, ironically, implies that they never fully abandon their homosexual pasts. The men at the New Hope center recognize that they may never be able to completely change their sexual identity, but they hope to remold it through building a relationship with God and Jesus Christ. After men leave New Hope, “their lives do not end in marriage but become a continual process of having sexual falls, recommitting to Christ, being celibate, participating in ex-gay ministries, and so on.”<sup>167</sup> Their identities do not conform to the strict straight/gay paradigms, but rather, they are constantly in flux. Their faith in a God who will constantly forgive and consistently take them back allows them to operate in a fluid manner and exist in an identity that transcends normal categories

I also saw some elements of queerness at the Prayer House for Christ, and moments where gender roles were not set in stone, but ebbed and flowed depending on the context and moment within the group. However, before discussing these, it is necessary to examine the existing gendered frameworks within the community.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 186.

### *Gendered Life at the Prayer House for Christ*

Indeed, at the Prayer House for Christ, “traditional” and conventional gender roles are believed to be sacred and divinely ordained. Certain activities at the PHC are structured around these roles. I observed this most while spending time with the PHC members who belong to a mission group which I will call Missions for Christ (MC). MC, as one woman, Kelly described it, is an “international inter-denominational mission organization” with tens of thousands of full-time missionaries. On its website, MC describes itself as a non-denominational movement made up of young Christians dedicated to serving Jesus. The MC team at the PHC used to be a mobile, moving group based in the Midwest. They settled in DC after a conservative Christian leader founded the prayer house. Along with other members of the Prayer House for Christ, MC missionaries spend their days praying for the end of abortion in public, as well as hosting visiting groups from other churches.

All of the young women from MC indicated that they believed men and women have distinct, separate roles pre-ordained by God. Kelly explained to me that “women are generally more emotional than men” and there are “distinct roles for men and women, even in the house of prayer.” Another woman, Hallie, believed that “God set up the family in a certain way.” She added that, “men and women are just simply different” and noted that her husband won’t “be able to breast feed my child.” Hallie intertwined gender roles with biological differences, which she believed to be designed by God. This viewpoint does stand in opposition to queer theorists who believe that gender roles are historically and socially constructed.

For the most part, members of the PHC believed that there was a natural hierarchy of authority based on gender. As one woman, Deborah, explained, “I’m not a

man and I'm not going to try to be one. And, God didn't make me one...I'll happily be under authority. But I can have a lot of authority delegated to me...Ultimately, a woman needs to have some sort of covering somewhere." Deborah also believed that gender was innate and inborn. She had been "made" a woman by God and saw no desire to transcend what she understood to be divinely ordained. For Deborah, gender also had hierarchical implications. She did not "naturally" have authority as a woman, but could have it delegated to her by the men in her life.

Several women used similar language to Deborah, and said that women need to have a sort of male "covering." This expression comes from a verse in the New Testament, which reads, "every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head."<sup>168</sup> Another member, Amy, explained to me that for PHC members, this term is not actually about literally covering one's head, but rather, it had a metaphorical meaning. Amy also thought that women could be leaders, but believed that women need a male "covering" as they go through life and work in the community. Today, according to Amy, the covering is more about "an idea of authority." In other words, women do not need to literally cover up as they go through life, but need to have the "covering" of male guidance.

These beliefs in gender impacted some of the MC organizational structure. For instance, MC men and women lived in different houses but ate group dinner almost every night of the week. The women cooked much more often than the men. One night I ate dinner at the women's house while the group was preparing to go to an all-night prayer marathon. When the beef dish ran low, one of the leaders encouraged the women to "leave the meat for the guys." Another leader explained to me that since men

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<sup>168</sup> 1 Corinthians, 11:5, (New International Version).

generally prayed later and harder than the women, they needed the protein to make it through the night. Once again, the insistence of “leaving the meat for the guys” suggests that the speaker believes that men are biologically different than women, that they are constructed differently, and need different food in order to perform their prescribed activities.

In the middle of my research period, the Christians of the MC team decided that on some nights, they would divide into groups of men and women while praying. Several people explained that women pray differently than men. Deborah told me that “the guys are much more aggressive, the girls are like, ‘mercy, mercy!’” According to Deborah and several people from the PHC, men can act more like “warriors” during prayer—they pray more aggressively, shouting and pumping their fists. Women, on the other hand, tend have softer, motherly and feminine prayer styles. Apparently, dividing between men and women in the night was supposed to allow each group to be stronger in their particular style of prayer. One woman told me that men won’t “go at it” as much if the women are there, as they do not wish to scare them.

Given all this information, it might seem that gender within the PHC community is fixed and unchangeable. Some scholars might examine the differences between men and women’s prayer and come to the conclusion that within the PHC, women are regarded as weaker and not as influential as the men. The women, who do most of the housework in the group, might be said to be “oppressed,” or “victims” of a top-down power structure. Such a conclusion would be too simplistic and fail to acknowledge the nuances of gender and identity at the house of prayer. With Foucault’s definition of power, we must look beyond top-down structures of power and examine the instances where ideas about gender are reproduced, resisted or transcended in on-

the-ground human relations. Despite the strict articulations and embodiments of gender in this community, there were moments where it shifted and changed, moments that were deeply intertwined with religious practice and belief. While not all members transcended and challenged notions of gender and sexuality, many did, and their actions are worth examining closely.

### *Transcending with Tongues and Passionate Prayer*

The prayer room was one space where moments of divine gender fluidity could occur. The spirit-filled worship style of the Prayer House for Christ and places like it often can make those outside the Pentecostal tradition uncomfortable and confused. For instance, in one of her columns on the 2008 presidential election, Maureen Dowd asks the McCain team to answer the following question about Sarah Palin, “Does she talk in tongues or just eat caribou tongues?”<sup>169</sup> For someone outside a Pentecostal or charismatic tradition, speaking in tongues may make an individual seem fanatical, unintelligent, or unqualified to be vice president. Others believe that Christians are not really getting in touch with the Holy Spirit, but rather, they are “faking it.”

In reality, speaking in tongues and other expressive styles of worship are sacred activities that may have genuine and complicated meanings. Individuals who perform this activity generally believe that they can personally and individually connect and communicate with God and the Holy Spirit. As explained in the previous section, several women and men of the PHC articulated that people pray differently depending on their gender. However, during spirit-filled worship, the categories between “men”

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<sup>169</sup> Maureen Dowd, “My Fair Veep,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2008, A25, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/10/opinion/10dowd.html?scp=2&sq=maureen%20dowd&st=cse> (accessed February 15, 2009).

and “women” were not always so clear-cut. At times, spirit-filled prayer allowed people to transcend normative ways of operating and behave in a way not considered “normal.” This practice could, at times, provide an avenue where women could go beyond conventional roles.

I observed Hallie, a young woman who attends the PHC, speaking in tongues several times throughout prayer meetings. She explained the practice to me in this way :

I believe that God’s given me a prayer language that edifies my spirit. I simply run out of things to pray in English. I don’t know where to go. Like I was saying—we really feel like we have a mandate on us. Each night we feel like we need to really feel like we’ve gotten a breakthrough in an area of prayer in these different things that we pray about. So to say, “thank you Jesus, that we have a language that our spirit can connect with your spirit. Often, 90% of the time, after praying in the spirit for a little bit, then words come to you in English.

Here, Hallie described the barriers and limitations of every day language. At times, when she was trying to connect with God, English failed her, and she did not know “where to go.” For her, praying in tongues was a way to rise above the barriers of every day language, and connect with a higher being. The belief in a personal relationship with God was another important element to this activity. Hallie believed that every night God had a specific “mandate” for their group. God individually picked out specific scriptures for the PHC members, and by praying in tongues, women could discover these scriptures. Although she eventually ended up speaking “in English” she could not discover the divine without breaking out of typical speech.

Other women at the PHC also indicated that the prayer room was a place where they could transcend standard ways of behaving in every day life and connect to something divine. Amy was one of the first members of the PHC whom I met. I approached her one morning as she prayed in public, and she immediately agreed to speak to me about her work with the PHC. She showed up to our interview right on time, wearing a long, flowing skirt, a tee shirt, and a bit of eye makeup. Her brown hair



was wavy from the humidity. Throughout our time together, she spoke confidently about her pro-life stance, and told me her personal conversion story. She laughed and smiled quite a bit, and told me that she saw God in the stars, the sky and the pink hibiscuses that lined the Supreme Court in the summertime.

When I attended the prayer rumbles, I saw a different side of Amy. Sometimes, she kept to herself, swaying with the music and closing her eyes as she prayed. On other nights, she became very passionate in prayer, shouting into the microphone, thanking God for George Bush's presidency or praying that America would turn towards Jesus. During one prayer rumble towards the end of the evening, she said wanted to lead the group in a "battle cry." Following her lead, the people of the PHC raised their fists in the air and shouted like medieval soldiers about to break into a castle.

In a second interview, over the phone, I asked Amy about her prayer style. Since she had said at our first meeting that women should be gentle in spirit, and I asked why it was also okay to be more forceful in prayer meetings. Amy acknowledged that God's words on gender were confusing. She noted, "I think that there is a lot of paradoxes in the word of God...it doesn't mean that they are both not right." She compared herself to a lioness, who appears tender, but then turns aggressive if someone tries to take away some of her cubs: "sometimes your gentleness looks not so gentle." She described what happens to her sometimes in the prayer room: "I think there is something inside of me that just goes off. It's almost like this thing that comes over me, I can't help but be passionate and extreme." Later, she called herself a "violent warring prayer."

Amy's words here indicated that the prayer room was a space where she could go beyond normative identity and ways of operating. Like the other women of the PHC, Amy believed that men and women are fundamentally different, that God calls on men

to be leaders more often than women. However, when we spoke about the prayer room, she acknowledged that there are paradoxes, things that don't quite line up perfectly to human eyes. In that space, not everything had to be "right" or completely logical. Rather, the prayer room was a space where humans could go beyond normative experience and understanding. Even though much of the time, she behaved and dressed in a way that might be considered "feminine" at the PHC there was a sort of energy that came over her, and there was room for her to be something else. For Amy and other members, this transcendence is accepted and celebrated because it stemmed from God, who had individual plans and desires for each member of the community. The members of the Prayer House for Christ supported her when she became something else, listening to her, cheering and clapping along.

Tess is another young woman from the PHC, who also often spoke in tongues, and took the microphone to pray fairly often lead her peers in prayer. Tess was perhaps the most enthusiastic woman at the rumbles: she danced and jumped up and down to express her love for God, cried to show her grief for abortion, and at other times, she laid her hands on her friends as they prayed spoke in tongues together. Tess also believed that God had different roles for men and women. However, for her, the prayer room was also a place where those roles could occasionally shift. She explained her understanding of gender and prayer to me as we talked at a bakery on Capitol Hill:

There is not a real clear cut, this is what a woman is, this is what a man is. I mean, there's times, even in the prayer room where it's the women who are leading out in prayer. God's given us the scripture, given us these things, we're the ones leading. When the men are really in their role, really following the spirit, I think it frees us up, to allow our emotions. For me, there are times when God quickens things in my heart. And I just want to cry in prayer. Cry. I don't know if that makes sense.

I think that he allows women to show his emotion, uses women to see the heart of God. We could look at women in the prayer room. Like, if they are crying, like, mourning, and weeping, and welling over stuff. Then that shows God's

heart...and not that the men's hearts aren't there, but that it frees us up to be able to stay in that area for a while, if that makes sense, cause we don't have the burden of carrying a prayer meeting. But if there weren't men there, and it was just us, then we would, if that makes sense. So I think it's a balance ...if one is really in a certain role, than the other is freed up to do their role.

And there's times when it might look different. There are nights where God's tenderizing [men's] hearts and making them tender to him, so we're doing more of the work.

For the most part, Tess's explanation of roles in prayer here fell in line with conventional notions of gender. Women performed "traditional" gender roles in the prayer room by "crying" and "welling over stuff." Tess positioned these acts as divine, saying that they "reflect God's heart." Men, on the other hand, were fully in "their role" of "following the spirit" when they led the prayer. They were the ones, for the most part, who had the burden of "carrying" the prayer meeting. When men led, according to Tess, women had the ability to fully express love for the Lord through outward expressions of emotion. Usually, this delicate balance and performance of conventional gender "frees" people to feel the love of God.

However, the prayer room was also a place where gender roles could shift, and go beyond the normative. Things were not, according to Tess, always really "clear cut" into strict binaries. There were times when God has specifically given women "the scripture" and they can lead instead of the men. There were also times when God "tenderized" the hearts of men, so that they could perform the role usually held by women. In this instance, the women played the leading role. The goals of this prayer (to change the legal status of abortion) are politically conservative. However, spirit-filled prayer could be an avenue for women to transcend "traditional" gender roles. The transcendent gender moments that did occur in the prayer room were not considered deviant, but rather, sacred and ordained by God. Prayer in other locations, such as in

public spaces within Washington, could also create dynamics where women could go beyond “traditional” roles.

### *Protests or Prayer?*

Throughout my summer research period, I spent much time observing PHC members as they prayed in a tourist location in Washington. This particular location is a space that showcases “normal” American culture and displays the scope of U.S. structures of authority. When a person stands in this space, she is within view of several symbols of American influence. She can see many of Washington’s white, shiny stone buildings, where men and women shape the policies that impact the entire nation. In the middle of the day on bright, Washington summers, the sun hits the marble of the surrounding buildings, creating an additional glare that makes all the architecture particularly striking. Indeed, the public prayer site is home to endless symbols that reflect sovereignty and the top-down structures of authority in this country.

In the summer, this site is also a display of normal American life and culture. On a given afternoon, there are hill staffers, lobbyists and lawyers eating lunch, speculating about the potential results of an upcoming meeting, or exchanging advice on troubled teenage children and romantic relationships. It is a site that is an important stop for American tourists making their pilgrimage to Washington. Helmeted tourists on DC Segway group tours roll by regularly. There are endless bunches of rowdy ten-year olds and awkward adolescents snapping photos on disposable cameras. There are families who are fighting about the next trip to the bathroom, or enjoying walking amongst famous buildings they have seen on television. In a way, all this activity upholds and legitimates the greater American structures of political authority. The professionals

eating lunch have dressed in order to work within and uphold the American political system. By journeying to Washington to explore the sites, tourists also validate this system.

Among all this, there was always at least one person from the Prayer House for Christ standing quietly and praying for revival and the end of abortion in America. The PHC leadership meticulously coordinated prayer schedules on Google calendars so that 24 hours a day, seven days a week, there was at least one member present to perform this activity. While praying, each PHC member wore a red piece of tape over his or her mouth that read LIFE. Typically, they stood in shifts at the site for a few hours at a time. PHC members had made a LIFE “rock” from all the tape that had been used. This rock, which was larger than a human head, often sat next to the PHC members as they carried out this public action. Some framed this activity as non-political, while others indicated that they did have political goals. The ambiguity around the exact meaning of the public prayer created a space where women had the opportunity to break “traditional” roles.

Each person from the PHC had a slightly different style of public prayer. Some members listened to “worship music” on their iPods, and swayed back and forth as they did so. Some stared straight ahead, while others bowed their head towards the ground. Occasionally a PHC member would raise his or her arms in prayer, as was so common at their services. Sometimes, if there were several members present, they would come together in a circle, take off the tape for a moment and pray out loud: “Jesus, I plea your blood over my sins and the sins of my nation. God end abortion and bring revival to America.”

After an evening of observing at the Prayer House for Christ, I met a friend for a drink in a bar in Bethesda, a predominantly white, upper-middle class suburb of Washington. In the middle of our conversation, my friend pointed to her old, rickety van, parked next to a line of Mercedes SUVs and BMWs. “Look” she said, “I’m queering the street.” Her van was upsetting the pattern of the otherwise yuppie line of cars, and calling into question the normative social expectations of the neighborhood.

The next day I began to wonder if in a way, the PHC members were queering the public space that they occupied. In a way, they had become permanent fixtures in the space, a “normal” part of public tourist spectacle. The leaders of the Segway tours that rolled by regularly mentioned them in the spiels about Washington and its history. However, the PHC members also disrupted normal activity of the site. For most people, this space was a site of noise and movement, but they stood silently as permanent fixtures. While some tourists enthusiastically encouraged the “intercessors,” others seemed confused by their presence. One group of international businessmen, speaking in a foreign language I couldn’t recognize, seemed fascinated with the Christians, and posed next to them for several photos. Had the PHC members become a “normal” part of the spectacle at this downtown spot? Or, did they disrupt the way that public space and political engagement usually worked? And, how did women understand their roles in this engagement?

Michael Warner discusses the history of queer protest in his essay “Something Queer About the Nation State.” According to Warner, queer activism is different from liberal activism in that it “scorns the traditional debate styles that form the self-understanding of the public sphere: patient, polite, rational-critical discussion.”<sup>170</sup> Queer

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<sup>170</sup>Warner, “Something Queer About the Nation State,” 210.

activist groups like ACT UP, OutRage and Queer Nation rejected aligning themselves with a particular party, and instead promoted their agenda with public action. These types of groups “believed that political struggles were to be carried out neither through the normal state apparatus nor through revolutionary combat but through the non-state media in which public opinion is invested with the ability to solve power.”<sup>171</sup> Indeed, queer activists rejected conventional methods for creating political change, and opted for more radical, unrestricted approaches in “urban space and public sphere mass media.” For instance, in 1989, the queer activists of ACT UP mobilized to protest hospital security guards at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Greenwich Village, who were allegedly harassing gay and lesbian patients and their partners.<sup>172</sup> Instead of lobbying the state intervene in this action, or meeting with hospital administrators to prevent it, the ACT UP members “packed the emergency room’s waiting area and stage a kiss-in, while 150 supporters maintained a silent vigil just outside the doors.”<sup>173</sup> These activists did not validate and use the normative avenues of change, but rather, they hoped to produce change at St. Vincent’s and through out New York by appealing to the mass public.

Obviously, the agendas of ACT UP and the PHC are quite dissimilar. ACT UP was fighting societal homophobia, while members of the PHC spent considerable time praying that the right to marry will not be extended to same-sex couples. In fact, members of each group might be unhappy to see themselves sharing a page with the

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<sup>171</sup>Ibid., 210.

<sup>172</sup> Andrew Miller, “ACT UP/NY kisses-in at emergency room; Group protests anti-gay incidents at St. Vincent’s” *Gay Community News*, February 5 1989, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed March 16, 2009).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

other. However, there are some interesting parallels between the styles of queer activists and those of these conservative Christians.

Like the protesters that Warner describes, the PHC members see themselves as set apart from other kinds of protesters, even other pro-life ones. Deborah, one PHC member said, “you know, we usually don’t want the life tape to be associated with big signs and billboards, the yucky pictures of stuff. That’s not what we’re doing.” Deborah refers to other pro-life advocates who have sought to change policy or legislation by loudly displaying slogans or photos of unborn fetuses. The people with the “yucky” pictures could be considered “normative” as they are the ones most often portrayed in the mass-media representations of pro-lifers.<sup>174</sup> Deborah sets herself apart from such groups.

In fact, many PHC members did not even see themselves as protesters or politically involved. Rather, they situated themselves outside of the conventional political framework. Deborah even said she never wanted to be an activist. She corrected me several times throughout our interview, when I kept referring to the Prayer House’s public activity as “protest.” She, on the other hand, explained action in this way:

The whole thing is, in the civil rights movement, it was a silent protest. A peaceful protest. We’re not protesting, we’re praying. There is nothing of violence of what we are doing. We are just simply appealing to God almighty.

Here, Deborah starts by comparing the PHC activity with the civil rights movement, a political movement that challenged dominant racial barriers of the time. Like the queer activists that Warner describes in his essay, Deborah also stresses that the PHC’s work is non-violent. At the same time, Deborah denied that PHC’s activity was meant to be for the state structures, by declaring, “We’re not protesting, we’re praying.” Deborah

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<sup>174</sup> See Faye Ginsburg, *Contested Lives*, 118. In this section, ABC produces a news story that focuses solely on pro-life protesters with militant, aggressive tactics, as opposed to representing the diverse methods of political engagement in Fargo, Minnesota.



and other PHC members do not necessarily see themselves as deeply involved in politics, rather, they are “just appealing to God almighty.”

Other members of the group made similar points about their work. One young PHC member described her work in this exchange:

Sarah: Do you consider yourself an activist as you do this?

Becky: I would say that I'm an activist. Yea. Definitely.

Sarah: Cool.<sup>175</sup>

Becky: We're set apart from many activists in that obviously we don't, we're not very boisterous or loud. Even when we stand out here, people say “Are you protesting? What are you protesting?” And we say “we're not protesting, we're having a prayer meeting.” Because we're out here every day, regardless of whether the justices are here. We have people here in the middle of the night. So its kind of one of those things—we're not really here for the eyes of man. Like, we're here to appeal to God in prayer—that he would change the course of our nation.

Unlike Deborah, Becky openly identifies as an activist, a person who takes action to produce political or social change. However, like Deborah, she does not see her work in front of the court as a form of protest. When people ask what she is doing, she too replies, “We're not protesting, we're having a prayer meeting.” (Indeed, I heard many members of the PHC repeat this statement.) She explains that her actions are not meant to change the minds of the people around her, but rather, to ask God to “change the course of the nation.” Becky even goes a step beyond the ACT UP activists here. The ACT UP members did not engage with the state, but rather sought to change public opinion through striking and provocative protests. Here, Becky did not want to work within the political system or even change public opinion, but transcend both of these avenues to appeal to God.

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<sup>175</sup>This moment demonstrates some of the complicated dynamics of performing fieldwork among people with whom I disagreed. At times, I struggled with ways to encourage my interviewees to continue to talk, without feeling like I was being dishonest about my own beliefs by affirming what they were saying. I did not agree with Becky's pro-life stance; but I looked for other ways to connect and learn from her as our interview continued. Though I was not necessarily “cool” and in agreement with her particular beliefs, but I did think it “cool” that she was so dedicated and passionate about changing the world around her.

In fact, within the PHC, there were a variety of ways of explaining what exactly the activity in front of the Supreme Court meant. Was it political? Was designed to change the minds of others, or merely to communicate with God? The actions and the words of different PHC members provided different answers to these questions. In a coffee shop one afternoon, in an unofficial interview, one young woman expressed to me that of course she saw their work as political. They were in Washington, the capital of the country, at the center of authority and law, standing in front of political landmarks, after all. Some members were more active about trying to engage the people around them before and after protests, while others chose to stay silent and stick to their prayer. I was not able to take an official survey about this, but I would estimate about half of the group regarded it as protest, while the other half did not.

To what extent was this activity disruptive of the status quo of the nation? Can such activity, which is at once disruption of public space and continuation of it, be considered queer? There are not easy, straightforward answers to these questions. The PHC's activity clearly has distinct parallels with queer protest, and divergent breaks from it.

However, in the end, it does not matter if this kind of activity is queer or not, or whether it is even protest or public expression or just prayer. What is interesting is that the PHC's activity in front of the court created a space where women could take dynamic roles that transcend "traditional" roles for women. The assertion that many PHC members make, that "its not protest, its prayer," allows women to take leadership roles in what is a public display of political beliefs without overtly disrupting "traditional" frameworks. They may participate in the political sphere; to an extent, but all still revere "traditional" gender roles because they deny that what they are doing has

earthly meaning. The tape over the mouth, which is meant to symbolize the silent screams of the unborn, also equalizes vocal leadership from either gender. In addition, the tape creates a dynamic where no one, man or woman, can be dominantly outspoken or vocal.

Some Christians, explained Deborah, believe that “because you are a woman, you can’t do anything.” Deborah did believe in more “traditional” roles, and said that she saw herself as “operating under my husband’s authority.” However, she did not agree with those people who wanted women to “stay home with the kids.” She, on the other hand, took her children with her to PHC activities. She was excited about involving her family in the PHC, and commented that “they’ll tell their grandchildren about it, I’m sure.” By being an attentive mother, and planning for future generations, Deborah was conforming to a more “traditional” role for women. However, at the same time, she practiced public activity in a place where men hold most authority, and her beliefs were made known to strangers.

Often I would walk by area where PHC members stood, and see a young woman standing praying alone with a red piece of tape over her mouth. One day, I wrote in my field notes that it was “too hot to breathe.” On these particularly brutal days, sunscreen would melt off my forehead, mix with sweat and drip into my eyes, making participant observation quite challenging and unpleasant. While I slinked away to a shady spot to rest on this day, one of my interviewees, Amy, stood by herself in front of the court, listening to her iPod and swaying as she did so. Though Amy said that women should have a male “covering” to guide and protect them, she seemed to be holding down the proverbial fort on her own. This task would be difficult for anyone to do, especially when tourists are present to snap picture and stare.

The ambiguity around what exactly the PHC's public activity was (protest? prayer? public expression?) allowed Amy, Deborah and other women to lead public activity without overtly challenging "traditional" gender roles. Other elements of the PHC way of life, particularly for those members who also belonged to Missions for Christ, also produced complex gender dynamics and expressions.

### *Questioning the Capitalist Paradigm?*

Indeed, the activity in public and inside the prayer room at the PHC could allow women to move beyond "traditional" gender roles, and transcend normative behavior. In addition, the lifestyle and counter-cultural attitude of the PHC created an atmosphere where women could, to a degree, question the "American way of life" and live in a way that rejects American consumerism and mainstream representations of women.

When Martin Luther started the Protestant tradition in 1517, one of the first things that he did was condemn the monastic lifestyle, calling it "unnatural." Instead, he advocated for marriage as the most natural and holy way for men and women to live, contending that a love between a husband and wife was the ultimate expression of God's love.<sup>176</sup> This idea challenged the Catholic traditions of celibate communities of monks and nuns. In the coming centuries, the monogamous, heterosexual couple would be the foundation of the nuclear family, a unit that would prove especially useful for the capitalist nation state.<sup>177</sup>

In a way, the Prayer House for Christ followed in Luther's tradition with its "pro-family" perspective. Many members of the PHC said they strongly believed in

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<sup>176</sup>Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 266.

<sup>177</sup> See Gerald W. Creed, "Family Values' and Domestic Economies" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000), 329-355.

“God’s plan” of “one man and one woman.” After “the sanctity of life” the “sanctity of marriage” was a top concern for PHC members. Kelly, a committed member of the PHC, said she believed there is so much “trouble” in our culture because Americans have strayed from this model. However, just because members of the PHC believed in this family paradigm does not mean they were all following it themselves, or that they were conforming to the capitalism that often goes along with it.

In the last week of research, I had dinner at the Missions for Christ (MC) house for women and married couples. A part of me had expected the house to be out in a quiet, residential neighborhood in the Virginian suburbs of Washington. Instead, Hallie directed me to take the metro into a neighborhood in Southeast Washington, an area that is predominantly African-American. Washington is a city that is largely segregated on color lines, though recently, those lines have begun to blur as developers erect fancy condominiums in traditionally black neighborhoods. The women of MC were predominantly white, though they were not a part of the recent wave of Washingtonian gentrification. The MC house felt new, but by no means was it fancy or extravagant. Hallie walked me through a first floor with an open living room, a dining room and a kitchen. We climbed staircases to the second and third floors, where Hallie gave me a tour of each bedroom. Each one had between two and five beds. These rooms were remarkably neat, especially considering the number of people who lived there, and the tendency of young people to be messy. Though Protestantism abandoned monasticism centuries ago, the MC house had definite similarities to a simple abode for monks or nuns.

After Hallie showed me all the rooms in the house, we walked back down the stairs to have dinner. Sweet potatoes were heating up in the oven and their aroma

drifted through the room. A white board hung on a wall by the kitchen, with a list of things that people should do. “Please pray for 15,000 dollars” read one line. There was a also checklist of chores that need to be completed—“take out the trash” and “soak the black beans on Friday.” The men arrived from the other MC house, and the group sat on long tables to enjoy their meal. I sat down on an end with mostly women, and talked to them about relationships, exercise, how they got to DC and what they hoped to have in the future. After the meal, the group leader gave a speech to prepare everyone for the rumble and prayer that night.

After the prayer there was some chaos and confusion as everyone figured out who was going in which car to get back to the PHC for the evening activities. I ended up in a sedan with Hallie and some other women who I had not met before. We weaved through the streets of Washington for about fifteen minutes and I took the opportunity to hold an informal focus group. The discussion continued when we arrived a few minutes early, and we took the chance to buy coffee and sit and chat for a minute. I asked about the meaning of a word I kept hearing, “intercession.” One woman defined it as “not praying in our own understanding.” Someone else said that it meant to “stand in the gap” between God and humans. Hallie says Jesus Christ is the ultimate intercession, as a figure who stands between the divine and humanity. They agreed that it was an act of intercession to move to DC to pray, to lay down material things in life to be with God.

The way that members of the Washington chapter of MC lived challenged American notions of capitalism and consumerism. They shared chores, divided up food, shared space, and lived simple life styles. Though many of them had iPods, for the most part, they dressed simply and modestly. The only thing I ever noticed anyone buying

was a large cup of coffee before the all night prayer session. Indeed, prayer, their most important daily activity, did not involve consuming or producing material goods. While some of their prayers had fiscal motivations (“please pray for \$15,000”) MC members were not earning wages for the activity that they performed. While the goals of their prayer were to save “unborn children” and preserve a “traditional” family structure often associated with capitalism, they themselves were not living in it.

The faith and beliefs of the members of the Missions for Christ informed their austere lifestyle. Hallie was particularly committed to living in a way that challenges “typical” American standards and norms. She was married, but had not chosen to settle down with her husband for a “typical” life. Instead, she preferred to live a somewhat Bohemian lifestyle: traveling from place to place with her husband, praying and doing missionary work. Hallie described her life choices in this way:

My whole paradigm of the American lifestyle is shattered. I'll never be satisfied with the American dream. That will never satisfy me. I know that there are deeper things that God wants for us....there are deeper things. The whole SUV, boat, white picket fence, dog. I just gave my dog away; I miss him. I love dogs. But do you know what I mean? It's deeper. It's so much deeper than this.

Hallie yearned for something “deeper” and more fulfilling than a lifestyle with material wealth, large vehicles, a perfect home and a pet. Her faith in God motivated her to believe that there is a way of living that was more meaningful than the American consumerist lifestyle. Apparently, hourly wages and material goods were meaningless for Hallie, who searched for greater spiritual fulfillment.

Not all members of the Prayer House for Christ lived at the MC house. Deborah came to the PHC with her husband and small children, and lived in a different house outside Washington. However, like Hallie and the MC members, her lifestyle was also quite different than the visions of the “American Dream.” Her own story of how she

came to be on the East Coast, working for the Lord was loaded with subversive elements:

[God] told us to move to New York. We didn't even have the gas money to get there. We didn't have an apartment rented or anything. So the day we leave we have gas money enough to get us half way there. We have a large moving truck, a huge dog, six children, no apartment rented in Manhattan or New York City. If you have lived there, it's absolutely crazy. You have to pay a commission for the realtor who shows you the apartment. Say the place is \$1800. You have to pay them \$1800 just because they showed you the place. Then you have to pay the \$1800 down, and then you have to pay the first and last. It's crazy.

Anyhow, we didn't know all that. I mean, we knew it was expensive. But the Lord said go. And we knew that we knew, and he had said it over and over and over again. So we left, and we got half way there, and its like, okay God, we're out of gas money. So we stopped and we prayed together as a family and the phone rang, and a friend of ours called and took us out to dinner. And we didn't tell him the situation we were in. He ended up giving us a gift and it was enough gas money to get us the rest of the way.

So we had the number of somebody who had been to one of our prayer meetings down in Florida, who had a brother who passed away, no, who had an uncle that passed away that had a brother in New York City who had property. So we called the guy on Sunday night as we are going into the city. And, um, he says okay I'll meet you in front of my funeral home, which was in the borough of Queens, which is just outside Manhattan, at 9 o'clock. He ended up giving us a three-bedroom apartment, free of charge, for four months, in New York City, which is absolutely unheard of.

Deborah's story provided resistance to the typical American Dream parable about individual people working hard and climbing the ladder of social and economic class. Instead of traveling East to West, as is usually the case in the model, Deborah and her family traveled West to East. In most American "success stories" the individual takes credit for being motivated, planning in advance and meticulously saving. In this story, Deborah and her family were remarkably clueless about New York City. They could not rely on themselves, but had to turn to God and their community members in order to survive. Their friend in the Midwest bestowed a gift on them to allow them to continue on their journey. In New York, a distant acquaintance takes them in and gives them a place to stay, free of charge. In recounting this narrative, Deborah upset the typical



American meta-narrative. Her faith in God, who had a specific plan for her family, permitted her to leave her home and take an unusual journey that is not often told in mainstream society.

Despite the bohemian lifestyles of Deborah and Hallie, there was a limit to the resistance at the Prayer House for Christ. None of the people I interviewed openly identified as “anti-capitalist” or suggested that they would prefer to live in a socialist life style. Hallie said that she thought socialism and communism seemed “really scary” as she believed the rich should give to the poor because they wanted to, not because the government dictates that they must. Several of the younger women noted that while they were living the austere PHC lifestyle at the moment, they planned on getting married and having children in the future. My sample size was relatively small, and I do not know how many women considered themselves to be actively challenging capitalism and consumerism. Nonetheless, it was clear that to an extent, the PHC was a space where the American consumerist lifestyle was called into question. Although eradicating poverty was not the main focus of the PHC, the way they lived their life challenged aspects of capitalism. The “hippie” aspect of PHC Christianity echoed the Jesus movement of the 1970s, and illustrates that groups that might be thought of as “far-right” can actually share some elements with the leftist and counter-cultural movements. The PHC was a space where the norms of society could be left behind, or at least temporarily abandoned. At times, this counter-cultural attitude translated into dynamic or subversive gender expressions.

### *Subversive Gender Expressions*

Indeed, while many PHC women were pretty, young women with long hair, stylish clothing and make-up, some of them avoided girly and feminine clothing all together. Several of them (at least five) had shaved their heads. This expression, which defied “traditional” roles for women, was not understood to be against the Christian rules of gender. Rather, members articulated this act as a part of their faith. For instance, when I asked Hallie why she personally had chosen to shave, she replied:

As women, hair is such a big deal. I choose to shave my head to say “I don’t want to be identified by anything but the Lord.” So I cut myself loose from that outwardly identification. It was an act of intercession for the women of America. Saying “let’s identify by the Lord, and not by.... the whole typical: magazines, MTV, movies.” All the things that say, “This is what an American woman is supposed to look like.” No! Let’s find out what the Lord wants.

For Hallie, shaving the head was a holy act, and a physical marker of her faith. She did it so her Christianity was the strongest marker of her identity and her personhood. In addition, shaving the head was also an act of subversion. She “cut” herself “free” from what American society wants a woman to look like, and challenged the ridiculous pictures of “perfect” women that appear in mass media. This was not an easy act for Hallie; rather, she indicated that people from her community at home might be skeptical or shocked about her appearance: “they wouldn’t understand it.... I think they know my husband and I are not living the typical American Christian life....our community is not so open.” Hallie’s anti-consumerist beliefs, informed by her faith, along with her strong belief in God who is personally invested in her life, led her to take on this unusual gender expression and make choices about her appearance that might not be widely accepted. Her appearance is an example of divine fluidity, as she transcended “traditional” roles while articulating her choice in the language of her faith.

Tess, who enthusiastically prayed at every PHC meeting I attended, had also shaved her head when I met her. Tess told me she had changed her appearance after another woman at the PHC had done so. She described the personal encounter she had with God while making her decision:

And then it was like, would I shave? Why would I do that? And it was funny...I almost felt like I heard, not "if you do it" but "when you do it, this is how you would do it. It was like "I would want you to do it with the whole team, I would want you to do it in a ceremony, This has to mean something, you're declaring what I have done in your heart.....At the court one day, I was praying about it all, and Jayne, Peter's wife, said "ask the Lord to set a date, if this is really God, he'll set a date.

Tess went on to tell me that the Lord had set the date for her to shave her head on Mother's Day. She shaved it in a ceremony with other PHC members, after setting it in seven locks and cutting them off one by one. Each lock represented an element of her faith, or something she wanted to cut out of her life with the help of God.

Here, Tess's appearance was also informed by her style of worship and communication with God. When Tess prayed, she believed that God spoke to her individually. She reported that God told her not only to shave her head, but the specifics date when she should do it. Once again, faith in an all-powerful God with specific plans for individuals engendered a situation where a woman could take agency and transcend typical gender performances. Tess's choice also shows her belief in a God who promotes a collective lifestyle. God ordered her to do this act not as an individual, but as a member of the team. Eventually, several women shaved their heads, and the bare head became a communal marker of faith. Finally, Tess's decision took place as she prayed out in public, which suggests the unusual, subversive things that may happen in that space.

Of course, not all the women had shaved their heads, and while for some, faith resulted in unusual gender expression, for others it did not. Jean, another young woman

from the PHC had a strikingly beautiful long red hair. She had never shaved her head, and explained her actions in this exchange:

Sarah: This may seem like a random question, but I noticed a bunch of the women in PHC have cut off all their hair. I was wondering if you ever thought about doing that. You have such great hair!

Jean: I told the Lord that he would have to tell me a lot to do that!... I know, I haven't ever seriously thought about it. But the Lord hasn't told me a "cut your hair off!" A bunch of them look...like Hallie, she's gorgeous! I'm like "how are you still so gorgeous when you are bald!"

Jean took the same steps that Hallie and Tess reported taking before making their decisions. She too reported having intimate conversations with the Lord, where she consulted with "Him" about her appearance. Though Jean had not chosen to express her faith in the same way that the other women had, she recognized that shaving the head could be a holy act. In addition, she seemed open to doing it herself, if only the Lord would make it clear that she was supposed to do so. It is also significant that Jean did not consider the baldness of her peers to be ugly or unholy—rather, she saw them as "gorgeous." Hair, which is such an important sign of gender in the United States, could be subverted through faith within this conservative Christian context.

### *Conclusions*

Certainly, though out my time at the PHC, I saw or noticed something that I would call "subversive" nearly every day. It is unclear whether these things can be called "queer" but sure that the PHC may share some things in common with radical leftist movements that challenge categories of identity and structures of the state.

I walked into the PHC on the first day with a pre-conceived notion about what the Christian women inside would look like and tell me. I judged one member I saw in the stairwell as a radical feminist, when in fact she was a committed member of a conservative house of prayer. Indeed, the PHC was home to an electric group of women

with diverse and vibrant stories. In some sense, many women conformed to a more “traditional” view on gender, and seemed to find empowerment in following roles they believed to be set by God. However, these same women had moments where they transcended typical gender roles. They did not see these moments instances where they rejected their faith, but rather, understood them to be sacred parts of religious practice. Of course, there were limits to how far divine fluidity could take them. All of them respected and revered traditional roles, and to come out as pro-choice would probably be socially unacceptable.

Nonetheless, it is essential to document and analyze these moments of transformation and disruption. Through speaking to these women, and engaging them in dialogue, it became clear that there was there is not a clear-cut distinction between political “right” and the “left.” These were individuals from the PHC community had carved out a space in betwixt and between.

## ***Conclusion***

In the media, the so-called Christian Right is often portrayed as a giant, monolithic voting block that James Dobson controls from atop a Colorado mountain. The women of these movements are represented either as conniving, anti-feminist hypocrites or as the moronic tools of men. In this thesis I have tried to show that these conceptions are false within at least three diverse communities of conservative Christian women. Within these particular contexts, there are multiple moments and instances where a woman maintains her religious identity, and even draws on her religious beliefs and practices, as she transcends norms of gender or sexuality. However, there are also limits in the extent of this transcendence, and the women who I interviewed always held a grounded respect and reverence for traditional gender roles and conservative limits on sex.

Nonetheless, it is significant to note that these instances of divine fluidity existed and that gender is enacted in a variety of complex ways around the country. This finding has some implications for the ways that leftist and feminist women talk about conservative Christians. The “tool of men” model breaks down when we examine the numerous examples and instances of women who use agency to assert themselves and find empowerment within their own contexts. In addition, the “hypocrite” model does

not stand after acknowledging the ways in which women understand what appear to be paradoxes from the outside, and negotiate their own complicated positions as active or assertive women within their communities of faith.

The research that I did for this ethnography challenged me in ways that no other academic project has in the past. Throughout fieldwork, there were moments when I stepped out of a prayer group or a meeting room to take a break because I was angry or upset about what I heard inside. At other times, I struggled to learn and understand the words of the women I interviewed. Though we shared the common language of English, there was also a long vocabulary and phrase list that I struggled to truly understand: “prayer rumbles” and “intercession.” But among the difficult moments, there were also many times when I laughed and had fun with the women I interviewed. Once an informant and I commiserated about the maturity level of the young male Washingtonian population. Although I did not always agree with the lyrics of the music at the PHC, sometimes the tunes were catchy and I hummed along as the people around me jumped up and down to praise the glory of God. I also had many fun, entertaining moments while working with the Ladies for the Lord months later. Once, during an interview, a member of that ministry group leaned in from across the table at Starbucks, looked over her shoulder, looked back at me, batted her eyes and said, “don’t tell anyone, but I voted Obama.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “me, too.” During another interview, a different Lady took me to a hole-in-the wall Mexican restaurant and enticed me to break my vegetarianism to try some pork tamales. Although a peer once half-seriously accused me of “fraternizing with the enemy” at times I genuinely enjoyed meeting and spending time with the women I interviewed. Through conversing and exchanging with them, I

learned ideas and ways of looking at the world that I could never find on the bookshelves of my college. Hallie and Tess, for instance, forced me to rethink the way I express my own gender, and consider ways that I could live in a simpler, less extravagant way.

These moments of fun and connection, along with the findings that gender and sexuality within the “Christian Right” are shifting and flowing rather than static, indicate that there is in fact great potential for dialogue between liberal feminist women and conservative Christians. This is not a radical or all that original suggestion, as other ethnographers with similar projects have made comparable points. At the end of *Contested Lives*, Faye Ginsburg argues that pro-life and pro-choice women are both ultimately fighting for similar ends, and that each group seeks to address inequalities for women that are created by capitalism and the American wage labor system. Ginsburg contends that women from both camps could have multiple opportunities to work together towards progressive causes such as providing support to young single mothers in need. *Contested Lives* ends on a hopeful note, as Ginsburg documents a group of pro-choice and pro-life women who have formed the group called Pro-Dialogue that seeks to work together to reduce the number of abortions across the state of North Dakota.<sup>178</sup>

After reviewing my own research and the existing research, I think that there is potential for more communication and dialogue between liberal or leftist feminists and conservative Christians. Many of the grass-roots activists from PHC in Washington rarely, if ever, had held conversations with pro-choice or feminist women. Some of the women of Ladies of the Lord had not heard of progressive movements for sex worker’s rights, or had not had in-depth conversations with women who want to decriminalize

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<sup>178</sup> Ginsberg, *Contested Lives*, 222-226.



prostitution to make the sex industry safer, while offering opportunities for women who wish to leave it. As I reflect back on the research that I have completed, I wish that I had taken more opportunities to offer my own viewpoints that contrasted with those of my informants. At first, I worried that if I “came out” as a pro-choice or feminist woman myself, the communities I worked with would reject me. At other times, I was worried about “tainting” my data. Critics of anthropology suggest that the researcher automatically changes her subject population by studying them, and I (perhaps naively) wished to know the women for who they were without my influence. And, as a naturally non-confrontational person, I did not look to endlessly engage people who held different viewpoints than my own.

However, if I had been brave enough to offer my own viewpoints, or, had I been in a non-academic situation, I might have engaged some of these women in dialogue where I could have candidly offered my own viewpoints. And, I believe that such dialogue would have been productive. Since the rules on gender and sexuality within conservative Christian communities are not static, perhaps there is room to work towards progressive goals that promote equality and acceptance for all human beings.

I am not advocating for converting these women or indoctrinating them into a liberal, leftist or feminist belief system. Some of the women that I met at the grassroots may never change their stance on the legality of abortion, while others may switch their beliefs within a few years. But, I do think that certain women might be more open to progressive initiatives if they had more contact with progressive women. Many of my interviewees had negative, monolithic conceptions of feminism, but might be more interested in the movement if they knew about its diverse initiatives. Some of the women may be open to working in groups like Pro-Dialogue if more such groups

existed. Organizations that work for sex worker's rights may turn away from groups like the Ladies for the Lord, as the Ladies primarily look to convert people and tend to demonize the sex industry as a whole. It may be possible, however, for such groups to find some sort of common ground, as both ultimately wish to reach out to people who are stigmatized in greater society.

It may seem futile to argue that there is a need for more dialogue between these groups. After all, with the Internet, shouldn't information about progressive viewpoints and ideas be available to all these women? Are there not multiple spaces for this dialogue, and should it not be occurring naturally? Why should progressive women take the time to even talk to groups like the Prayer House for Christ? Why should sex worker's rights organizations look to reach out to women like those in the Ladies?

Within my own privileged position as an academic student, it is sometimes hard to remember that information and philosophies from progressive groups are not readily accessible and available to everyone. While I take the Internet for granted, several of my informants did not appear to be comfortable with it. When I e-mailed professional women for responses on my paper, many of them got back to me right away. On the other hand, the grassroots activists, many of whom were from smaller, more rural towns, were not always comfortable corresponding over e-mail.

While the media and technology are often credited for facilitating dialogue between opposing groups, in reality, they may create barriers. In her work, Ginsberg notes that the media profits from portraying conflicts between pro-life and pro-choice women. Ginsberg documents the nuances around the abortion debate in Fargo, Minnesota, and describes a number of moderate activists want to have dialogue with other women. However, while she was researching for her ethnography, ABC created a

sensationalist news report on the same debate, but only portrayed the radical, confrontational group Save-a-Baby.<sup>179</sup> During the 2008 election, the media also profited by showcasing the animosity between women who were for Palin or against her. NBC's Tina Fey appeared on a number of magazines after her impersonations of Palin, and Saturday Night Live's ratings shot up.<sup>180</sup>

This animosity surely did exist, as evidenced by the anti-Palin grassroots Internet frenzy described in the introduction. However, there was so much more than fear, anger and indoctrinated women in the conservative Christian communities where I did my research. There is something deeply disturbing about capitalist media corporations profiting from representing an oversimplified version of conservative and liberal women's complex relationships with one another. Their portrayals do not encourage dialogue, and they keep women from such groups from uniting for other causes. The truly radical thing for a feminist to do is not to stay isolated, and far to the left, but to engage women from more conservative communities in creative discourse. It is my hope that this thesis highlights some of the complexities within conservative Christian communities, and fosters that sort of exchange.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>180</sup> Brian Stelter, "SNL' Sees Its Ratings Soar," *The New York Times Online*, September 14, 2008, <http://tvdecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/14/snl-sees-its-ratings-soar/> (accessed April 20, 2009).

### ***Appendix: Sample Interview Questions***

As noted in the introduction, these were sample questions that I brought with me to each interview. However, I let each informant lead the conversation, and also asked follow-up questions depending on their particular interests and activities.

#### *Questions for politically active women in Washington:*

Tell me about the activist work that you do.

How long have you been doing this work?

What motivates you to keep doing it?

Do you identify as pro-choice or pro-life? Why?

What do you think about women who are "on the other side of the fence"?

Do you know any women who are on the other side of the fence?

Where do you get information about them?

Do you think that there are any things that you might have in common with these women?

Would you tell me about your religious beliefs?

How long have you been practicing your religion?

What does your religion say about the role of women in society?

What does your religion say about the role of women in the family?

What is your definition of "feminism" ?

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

#### *Questions for Christian women who work with sex workers:*

Tell me about the work that your organization does.

Tell me about your faith.

Do you attend a church? Tell me about it.

When did you become a Christian?

What makes you excited about Christianity?

Do you think God has distinct roles for men and women? What are they?

Do you think that women should submit to men?

Do you think that men should save sex for marriage?

Do you think that women should abstain from sex until marriage?

Do you think sex is sinful?

What does the Bible say about sex?

How does your organization reach out to sex workers?

How does faith play a role in what you do?

What motivates you to do the work that you do?

How many women do you reach? How many end up converting?

I think its really interesting that you are reaching out to exotic dancers/sex workers, considering you believe they are living in sin. Is this a conflict for you at all?

Do you ever come into conflict with other Christian organizations?

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