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Jesus Was a Feminist: An Institutional Ethnography of Feminist Christian Women

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Abstract

Institutional ethnography is used to examine the everyday, lived experiences of feminist Christian women in relation to Biblical text. Through interviews, I explore how feminist Christian women respond to, organize, and are organized by textually mediated social relations. While feminist and Christian institutional discourses appear on the surface to be competing belief systems, the women I interviewed had a variety of responses to this apparent dissonance. Related to local and trans-local settings, their responses include compartmentalization, information management, selective religiosity, and integration of beliefs.

> Jesus was a feminist—one of the greatest feminists of all time… I can't understand Christians who say they aren't feminists!
> ~*Marie*

In this research, I employ institutional ethnography to explore the discourse surrounding the ways in which feminist Christian women make sense of Christian liturgy in light of what appear to be competing belief systems. Institutional ethnography, a feminist method of sociological inquiry developed by Dorothy E. Smith, requires the researcher to take the standpoint of the ruled. This standpoint locates our selves as actively involved in our research—the woman's standpoint is the working, actual, on-the-ground perspective. It is rooted in the embodied, everyday-everynight viewpoint of a person who is engaged in social relations that link her to others in a variety of ways (Smith, 1999). Through institutional ethnography, I examine these textually mediated social relations in terms of how they organize, how they *are* organized, and how feminist Christian women respond to, interact with, and contribute to them.

The issue is explored through my own experience as a feminist and as a former member of the Christian Reformed Church and through my conversations with women identifying as both feminist and Christian. Intimate familiarities with feminist and Christian discourses reveal certain tensions between the two, especially in issues of sex/gender inequality. What happens when both of these discourses are adopted by one person? Do women who identify as both feminist and Christian engage in a particular process or do some work to reconcile what appear to be contradictory values? To answer these questions, I begin with an examination of the every day, lived experiences of feminist Christian women in relation to a particular Biblical text.

The text is well known in Christian discourse as the Lord's Prayer:

> Our Father,
> Which art in Heaven.
> Hallowed be Thy Name.
> Thy Kingdom come,
> Thy Will be done—
> On Earth as it is in Heaven.
> Give us this day
> Our daily bread,
> And forgive our debts,
> As we forgive our debtors.
> Lead us not into temptation,
> And deliver us from evil.
> For Thine is the Kingdom,
> And the Power,
> And the Glory
> Forever.
> Amen.
> ~*Matthew 6:9–16, Luke 11:1–4*

This is the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples, as recorded in history by the writers of the Biblical books of Matthew and Luke. Translated into many languages, the Bible is believed by Christians to be the holy word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Individually, socially, and within the institution of the Christian church, people in different countries, time zones, and languages have their actions coordinated by the activation of this text. The Lord's Prayer is transmitted to Christians internationally as the standard for prayer. Christians the world over start and end their days with the Lord's Prayer, bowing their heads, bending their knees, gathering with their families. In small groups and in churches, they recite the words in unison, read them, and listen to others pray them. This speaks to the trans-local nature of textually mediated social organization,

which occurs in and across local and trans-local settings where groups of people are involved in activating the text.

Specific questions arise when considering the Lord's Prayer in relation to feminist ideologies. Do women identifying both as Christian and feminist find tensions between their two belief systems with regard to this text? How does the institutional discourse surrounding this text affect their activation and performance of the text. Is there any reconciliatory work being done by these women in resolving any tensions between feminist and institutional perceptions of this text?

The assumption of tensions between feminism and Christianity is grounded in my twenty-five years of accumulated study of Christian texts and discourses, as well as of the values, beliefs and rhetoric expounded by the Christian Reformed Church of Canada, which I attended during this same span of time. Early adoption of feminist ideals—without formal exposure to feminist theory—created an increasing level of discomfort for me as I became less able to accept Biblical text in the unquestioning manner that is sometimes defined as "faith" in mainstream Christianity. This discomfort increased—as the disjuncture of feminist and Christian ideologies became increasingly apparent—and resulted in my personal withdrawal from all the institutional aspects of this religion.

Not all women identifying as feminist and Christian choose to disengage from their church communities. Many continue the work of activating Christian liturgical text either individually or within an institutional setting, questioning and challenging the assumptions intrinsic to those activities. In sharing their experiences, three women—referred to in this paper as Kate, Heidi, and Marie[*]—illuminate the disjuncture, complementarity, and fusion of these two identities into unique feminist Christian discourses.

The work of activating the text differs, depending on whether one intends this undertaking to be an individual or group event. In the case of individual activation, it may be a silent recitation prior to a meal. Or, it may involve a more intricate ritual: perhaps choosing a particular time of day to dedicate to the activity, traveling to a quiet place, secluding oneself, reading the Bible, meditating, chanting, singing, or combining any number of actions that add personal meaning to the experience. In addition, the work of activating the text may include such things as preparing breakfast for one's family, bathing, ensuring there are clean clothes for oneself and one's partner and children to wear to church, cleaning the home in preparation for the possibility of company coming by after the church service, fuelling a vehicle, walking or arranging other transportation to the place of worship, or ensuring children have memorized a song or verse for their Sunday school class. All of these types of preparations, in different combinations, are lived experiences of the unrecognized work that takes place prior to and makes possible the activation of the text.

The activation of the text, particularly in the institutional setting of a church service, is not a neutral undertaking and involves certain assumptions: persons present have memorized or are familiar with the text, can locate it within the larger body of textual material at the location, and have a desire to participate in meaningful performance of the text. These assumptions affect the individual's relation to both the text and the church.

Heidi describes her first experience of the Lord's Prayer in the context of a Sunday service in an Anglican Church in her hometown. She was only attending for the purpose of performing as a member of her school choir. Prior to the sacrament of communion[1], church members performed the Lord's Prayer in unison without significant prompting, introduction, or memory aids. This experience, as well as subsequent similar experiences resulted in confusion, as "…they never told you in the book where it was, you were just expected to know it." The expectation that each person present at the service knows certain parts of commonly used liturgy did nothing to promote increased access to the text, nor did it foster a desire to learn the text for its intrinsic value; rather, it created a discomfort in the church setting, stemming from an impression that belonging to the church involved some type of esoteric knowledge.

[*]Names of research participants have been changed.

[1] The sacrament of communion is a ritual in which Christians eat bread and drink wine to remember that Jesus Christ sacrificed his life (flesh and blood) and suffered in hell as payment for the sins of humanity. On the third day after his death, the Bible says, Jesus arose from the dead, appeared to his disciples so that they would have no doubt of his resurrection by God, and ascended into heaven to be with the Father (Matthew 26:26–27:20; Mark 15:21–16:19; Luke 23:26–24:50).

The notion of esoteric knowledge is supported by Kate's assertion that she was not "…taught it, I just remember sitting in church, and I think I just picked it up," and Marie's recollection that "…it's the first thing you memorize." The initial motivation for activating the text in Heidi's case was to alleviate the uncomfortable situation of being unable to follow institutional liturgical programming, rather than a desire to perform and access the true meaning of the text. For Kate and Marie, initial activation of the prayer involved repeated exposure to its performance in an institutional setting, resulting in its memorization. In each case, none of the institutional assumptions of knowledge of the text, or related desires to activate it in a meaningful way were met during each participant's initial performance of the Lord's Prayer; this had the most noticeable effect on Heidi, a non-Christian who began attending the Anglican Church to sing with her school choir.

When the text is known, institutional recital includes the assumption that persons participating in its performance are familiar with its origin and meaning, have the same or similar beliefs regarding the text, and agree with the church's presentation of it. In this case, Biblical accounts of the origin of the Lord's Prayer state that this prayer was taught by Jesus Christ to his disciples after they asked him how to pray. Of the women interviewed, only Heidi claimed knowledge of the origin of the Lord's Prayer, saying that after she began to attend the Anglican Church regularly the pastor there gave a series of sermons on the topic. When asked if the origin of the Lord's Prayer made any difference to their beliefs or interpretation thereof, Kate stated, "I don't think I ever really thought about that," and Marie replied, "I don't think that origin means so much to me." While the lack of contextual presentation of these remarks belies the women's general awareness of this text, their commentary is indicative of erroneous assumptions related to the activation of the text within the church institution.

Heidi feels that "because it was a prayer that Jesus had taught us to pray to the Father, that something spiritual happens when we pray it, beyond our own intellectual ability to understand…" In addition, the series of sermons given at her church assisted her in understanding that the origin of the prayer is part of why this particular text is important. She is convinced that the church reflected her own beliefs in this area, rather than her beliefs being a reflection of church teachings. For Kate, the origin of the prayer does not make a difference; what is more important is that the transcendent qualities of God are acknowledged by her church through incorporation of another gender to the text. Having the pastor begin the Lord's Prayer by saying "Our Father/Our Mother" during church services is a necessity for Kate, as a feminist woman with a same-sex partner, to feel that she "had a place in the religion."

Marie states that rather than the Biblical origin of the Lord's Prayer, "the cultural value means a lot to me." The prayer is no more or less important because of how it came to exist; what matters more to Marie is its present meaning to the Christian community as a whole, as well as to the individual persons choosing to activate the text.

In addition to differing beliefs about and familiarity with the origin of the Lord's Prayer, discussions with these women reveal opinions differing from the dominant Christian discourse regarding meanings within the text. Says Kate:

> I don't like the part—the temptation part, and the deliver us from evil either…I realize that there's different things—like, you can be a good person, you can be a bad person—but…I don't think that God doesn't want me to have pre-marital sex, and God doesn't want me to have a female lover, and I don't think that— don't necessarily buy into the idea that there's temptations that I shouldn't go into…and I don't necessarily… believe in a hell…how do you believe in a heaven without believing in a hell? I don't know, but I do…I'm not fond of that part of the prayer.

In this statement, Kate questions the necessity of avoiding "temptations" generally interpreted by Christians as morally wrong, such as pre-marital and same-sex sexual relations. In addition to this departure, she refers to the corollary of heaven-hell as something in which she does not believe. Both of these comments indicate that a selection process based on a different set of values was necessary in order for her to continue her acceptance of Christian liturgy and institutional discourse as a part of her lifestyle.

Marie draws attention to some of the same terms in the Lord's Prayer as Kate, but for different reasons. Marie points out that language and cultural references change throughout history, and in terms of Christian rhetoric, it is difficult to interpret "things like using words like "evil," "power," and "glory"—

those are all words that have been used, like "evil"—what do we think of when we hear the word evil—the forces of evil in the world?" While there is some consensus across Christian denominations regarding the interpretation and application of these terms, Marie's comment highlights the historical and trans-historical nature of this text. The Lord's Prayer, in use for nearly 2000 years, has been interpreted in various ways throughout history, and may be interpreted differently today than it was at its inception.

Similar to Marie's view of the trans-historical nature of the text, but more in keeping with Christian discourse, is Heidi's view that the Lord's Prayer transcends time:

> I have prayed it and felt a really neat connection with the church of the past…as something that Jesus taught, it has the authority of God, and if we can look at it in the context it was said originally, we can better understand it and apply it to our present situation.

This perspective, rather than perceiving a certain amount of difficulty or variation in interpreting meanings within the text due to historical change, adopts the dominant Christian discourse that Biblical teachings are as applicable today as they were in Jesus' time.

Kate accepts intergenerational differences in the interpretation of God as a force, rather than as a male or female figure. She says, "[The Lord's Prayer is] something that presumably most people believe in when they're saying it, and you're all saying it together." Regardless of individual differences in perceptions of God, or variations in the meanings of various words, the notion of God—and of Jesus Christ as the son of God—is common to every participant. Marie's statement is inclusive of institutional terminology, but it is indicative of a non-literal interpretation of the Bible. In her view, God is neither male nor female; therefore, Marie looks at the "Our Father" as a non-gendered term for God. In addition, she finds strength in "the power of knowing that so many people have said it and believed in it."

In general, opinions differing from dominant Christian discourse regarding meanings within the text are based on a view of the Bible as a non-literal document, with various interpretive possibilities influenced by the interpreter's age, historical time period, gender, education, and social context. The Biblical text, then, while accepted as God's holy inspiration, is seen as poiesis—the original writer's interpretation of Jesus' words, to be re-interpreted through the lens of the reader. Given the contrast of this opinion with that of more traditional, fundamentalist Christianity, it is surprising that each woman presents the same institutional assumption: persons united in the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in a church setting all have the same or similar beliefs regarding the meanings in and behind the words being spoken.

In this institutional setting, the Lord's Prayer serves the purpose of creating a sense of unity but has the corollary of reduced personal meaning. Research participants indicate that occasional meaninglessness is due to automaton-like performance and to a feeling of committing an action similar to those performed in "cult" settings. All the women interviewed make statements evoking feelings of connectedness to other Christians through the activation of the text. This sense of intergenerational, cross-cultural linkage is one aspect of the sense of communion elicited by the Lord's Prayer; in addition, an imminent sense of unity arises through the simultaneous recitation of the text during church services. Within this institutional setting, research participants relate, they truly feel bonded with God and their sisters and brothers in Christ.[2]

> There's power in something…collective, and it's like the power of chant…you're all unified in a sense, which I really love about going to mass, and praying, is that there's really something powerful in hearing your voice amongst a group of others who are saying the same thing and who are praying, and feeling the same spirituality that you do.

In this statement, Marie reiterates the organizational assumption that others present in this social interaction have the same (or at least similar) beliefs regarding the meaning of the text and are in agreement with the church's presentation and method of activation. This spiritual connection is expressed in a similar fashion by Heidi, who states, "I feel that there's a lot of unity in it, as well, when we pray it together as Christians."

In positing that persons present have the same

[2] "Brothers and sisters in Christ" refers to the belief that through the life and death of God's son, Jesus Christ, all believers are adopted as sons and daughters of God—brothers and sisters through and with Christ.

feelings and are affected spiritually by the performance of this prayer in the same manner and degree, Marie illustrates the type of belief that is characteristic of Christian faith. Rather than empirically based knowledge, faith is a belief in things not seen; in this case, it may be interpreted as the assumption that others feel the same sense of spirituality when engaged in performance of the text.

Kate agrees that "[The Lord's Prayer] definitely brings unity" but continues to assert that alteration of the text is a positive step for Christian churches.

> I think anytime that we do it slightly differently, it brings meaning because it breaks the rhythm where you're just spewing out something that is memorized. Christmas Eve, you have so many people that don't normally go to church that there's a lot of people that don't know it. So I think more about it more on Christmas Eve than I do on any other day.

Unity in activating the text only occurs when its performance is mindful; making changes in the wording or changing the style or pace of how it is activated (i.e. chanting) prevents the possibility of an automaton-like recitation by those familiar with the text.

The perception of a mindless or automatic performance is summed up by Heidi's first experience of the text in the Anglican Church. To her, the Lord's Prayer seemed like "this sort of drone-like system of words." Marie uses the same wording to describe the lack of spiritual fulfillment that occurs with the repetition of liturgy on a regular basis. "Sometimes… you listen to people saying it all together, and it sounds like drones, you know…" She goes on to agree with Kate's previous statement regarding altering the performance of the text, saying "…different religions have helped me give different meanings to it, like Buddhist chant. Until I'd heard Buddhist chant, I never saw [the Lord's Prayer] as a potential chant…meditative."

Kate's experience of chanting the Lord's Prayer also resulted in a new appreciation of the text, by drawing her out of her comfort zone. She states:

> I remember when it was an Easter service… and everyone sort of sang the Lord's Prayer at the same time, and it was really eerie, only because… I was going through a time where I wasn't comfortable with my beliefs, or where I fit in them, and I felt… why were we saying this and why did we all believe… you read things about cults, and you wonder, how can they all believe that?... so, during my youth I questioned it a little… I probably still do.

This questioning of her beliefs has resulted in a firmer sense of her beliefs overall; in particular, parts of this text resonate with her enough to enhance her experience of performing it in the church.

According to Heidi, "…one of the risks of having an institutional prayer is…you just speak it…in moments like that we might as well not be there, and we might as well not pray it, because it's just this institutional gathering that doesn't have anything to do with spirituality." All three women recognize this risk and admit that there have been times where this statement is representative of their experience. The explicit instructions of Jesus about how to pray to God are enacted by the church on the authority of the Bible; therefore, this is not in question. For these women the questioning arises in the interpretation of the instruction, in the acceptability of variation in how they go about following Jesus' commandment, and in how it is informed by their acceptance of what may be seen as the competing values of feminism.

Variations in following Biblical standards of prayer increase depending on the location of the petitioner. Institutional practice permeates the private practice of Christianity and its associated liturgy; however, for these women, variation is embraced in personal prayer, as individual differences from institutional discourse are representative of a personal relationship with God and are seen as a sign of spiritual development.

In Kate's case, changes in institutional practice were directly transferred to her entire family. "…[W]e changed our prayers at home too, so for our grace we wouldn't use a male name…we'd say 'let us thank God for our food,' or 'let us thank her'…it was actually quite individual." It was acceptable in her home to personalize prayer in whatever way each person felt was appropriate for the moment.

In relation to the text, Kate "very seldomly" uses the Lord's Prayer for her personal devotions, explaining that "when I'm doing a [different] prayer on my own, I *feel* much more…" The use of her own dialogue of prayer rather than institutional liturgy creates a more intimate conversation with God for Kate, whereas Marie and Heidi indicate that the Lord's Prayer is comforting in itself and provides a framework for their personal prayers. Says Marie,

"…sometimes I get insomnia, and I use that or the serenity prayer to put me to sleep, because I find it really calming, saying it over and over in my head." This calming effect is described by Heidi as well: "…when I was feeling lost and afraid in a spiritual sense, and just really alone, and didn't know what to pray, or how to communicate to God, that I could just say these words, and pray them, and somehow it would make things better, whether I understood them or not." Activating this liturgical text in private comforts and consoles both of these women in times of disquiet and loneliness while apart from their fellow Christians.

In addition, the trans-local nature of the text is illustrated by its use outside of church and by the recognition that others in various locations are finding meaning in it as well. For instance, Heidi says, "I feel a sense of unity, even when I'm by myself, just in knowing that people all around the world in different cultures, in different languages, in different experiences than my own have prayed this prayer, earnestly and sincerely, to the Father." Finding spiritual comfort through activation of the text is made possible due to its trans-locality; no matter their location, the women are able to feel less lonely by coming into the presence of God and their co-believers worldwide.

Further, the activation of the text apart from the church setting creates the opportunity for the women to change it in ways that suit their circumstances. Marie comments on the helpfulness of being provided with guidelines for spiritual practice, saying, "…as a personal prayer I recognize it's useful, and I'm happy to have it." In the same way, Heidi explains that the structure of the text—praising God, repenting, petitioning for needs and wants, and glorifying God—is a helpful outline for all prayer. "I think when I pray it by myself, the difference is, I usually use it…as just a frame…to keep me on track and focused, so I really appreciate this as a tool of meditation." These statements illustrate the willingness to adapt institutional liturgy to one's personal needs, and they indicate the belief that there is a correct manner in which one may alter the text.

"I think we have a cultural obsession about being right, and being factual. Being right or wrong, is owning power, which is a lot of what the church has been built on, and I see that as being a major fault and doing a disservice to Christianity and spirituality in general." With this, Marie sums up a main source of tension between feminist and Christian ideologies: competing beliefs regarding who has power. In the Christian tradition God, Jesus Christ and his disciples, and the writers of the Holy Bible are all men; further, women are often depicted as either virgins or whores, referenced as men's property, and subject to their will.[3] Feminist ideals of equality for women and men of all ages, races, ethnicities, abilities, genders, sexualities, etc. are incompatible with this type of power structure. Differing Christian and feminist ideologies, each vying for priority over the other, must be addressed by those identifying with both sets of discourse.

Depending upon their social context, this dissonance is addressed differently by the women interviewed, who make use of compartmentalization, information management, selective religiosity, and integration of beliefs.

> …[I]n feminist circles, I don't refer to myself as a Christian very much, and part of that is just a fear of being attacked, or being misunderstood, or not being considered 'feminist enough'…and also, there comes the problem [for others] of Are you a Christian or feminist first?

Marie's sense of disjuncture is rooted in others' perceptions and stigmatization of her feminist and Christian identities, resulting in the employment of information management[4] and compartmentalization strategies to maintain relatively separate spheres of engagement for each identity. For feminists and Christians, the priority of their ideals as either feminist or Christian is projected out to others claiming the same identity; however, if others do not

[3] Genesis 19:6–8—Lot offers his virgin daughters to a mob of angry men; Exodus 21:7–11—Israelites in financial straits may sell their daughters as slaves; Leviticus 21:9—a priest's daughter who is found to have lost her virginity shall be burnt with fire; Leviticus 21:10–15—a priest may only take a virgin for a wife; Deuteronomy 22:13–21— a wife whom is declared to have not been a virgin on the wedding night by her husband shall be stoned to death; Deuteronomy 24:1–4—an unhappy husband may divorce his wife; Judges 11:29–40—Jephthah the Gil'eadite gives his daughter as a burnt offering to God; Judges 19:23–25—a Levite offers his concubine to a group of Benjaminites; Colossians 3:18–19—wives commanded to submit to husbands; 1 Corinthians 11:3–12—women subject to/created for men; 1 Corinthians 14:34–36—women to be silent in church; 1 Timothy 2:8–15—women to be silent, women are saved by bearing children; 1 Peter 3:1–7—wives subject to husbands; Ephesians 5:22–33—husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church.

[4] For more on information management, see E. Goffman, *Stigma* (1963).

perceive them to be giving one identity priority over the other, they may not be accepted or taken seriously in feminist or in Christian circles. Interestingly, for Heidi and Marie it appears that being identified as Christian within feminist social settings is more stigmatizing than being feminist amongst other Christians. Heidi states, "…for the longest time, I'd never really call myself a Christian, but I'd say, I'm striving to be a disciple of Jesus…" This presentation of self as an individual disciple of Jesus, rather than as a member of a larger religion, was due to her assessment of hypocrisy within Christian institutions and to her belief that her feminist friends would perceive her negatively should she reveal her Christian identity.

Kate indicates that the closed-minded individuals composing her church congregation created a negative environment for her feminist ideals, and that there were times she considered leaving the United Church. She credits the beginning of a female pastor's ministry with her church as a turning point in reconciling her feminist and Christian beliefs, saying, "…if we hadn't had Jan as a Reverend…I'm not sure if I could've…continued with church…It was much more inclusive…and I wouldn't say the congregation was…it's not a very accepting community…" In the end, Kate agrees with Marie and Heidi, summing up their discussion with

> …[I]t's been easier to bring a feminist perspective into Christianity than it has been to bring Christianity into any sort of feminist discussion or feminist classroom, I've found…just as with anything, there's sorts of stereotypes that go along with saying you're Christian.

It is clear that for these women the process of incorporating both feminist and Christian discourses as primary in their lives involves an introduction of feminist thought into their Christian faith, rather than the reverse. The practice of creating a more progressive, feminist Christianity is rooted in the struggle for human rights. That is what Christianity is based on, states Marie: Jesus, a person who was fighting for social justice.

> To me a Christian is…taking what are the main premises of the person of Christ as presented in the Bible, which is love and acceptance, and social justice… and, applying that, using that as a platform for your life—your set of beliefs—and how you act day to day, and on a larger basis in your life. To me, a feminist is a part of being Christian, because feminism is a movement and a commitment to gender equality and it's a responsibility to always fight for that, but not just fight for it, but to maintain it in our society.

The women herein identified as feminist Christians have a number of general commonalities that either contribute to or are a part of a new feminist Christian discourse. First, none of them regularly or exclusively attend a particular denomination of the Christian church. Kate does not attend church regularly at present, but will attend services at her childhood church when she is visiting her hometown. Heidi does not identify with a church. She states, "…I don't really consider myself an Anglican…I prefer to say that I just come from a Christian perspective…If I weren't able at some point in my life to differentiate between the church and God, I'd never be a Christian..." With these strong words, Heidi distinguishes between beliefs about God and the practice of Christianity, and she indicates that those beliefs are more important than the institution built around them. The church and the Christian religion itself are further defined by Marie as tools for personal growth:

> …[I]n regards to Christianity and feminism you cannot rely on there being a right or a wrong…I've always seen Christianity not as a set of beliefs set in stone, but rather as a commitment to a journey, to growth, and I see feminism as the same thing… everything becomes a tool for your identity…

These tools for the journey may be taken up by feminist women and adapted as needed to various circumstances in their lives.

The second commonality in this new feminist Christian discourse is the women's constructions of God as a non-gendered, sentient entity. Even though all the women's introductions to Christianity included male representations of God, Heidi says, "I never perceived God to be male or female." This is a slight contrast to the gender inclusivity of Kate's church, where God is referred to with either or both male and female pronouns; however, discussion regarding the limitations of language feature in every interview. Marie states, "…the limitations of language and how we understand God is—has been genderized; this doesn't have to be…God is both—or neither—so, with that understanding, I can say that

[the text] and not feel threatened by it [referring to God as 'Father']."

Marie refers to God as "non-gendered" but touches on Kate's idea of God as "all-gendered"; in any case, both are congruent with the feminist ideal that all genders are equal.

Third, while not all agree that the *text* should be changed, there is agreement that, with regard to gender, the *interpretation* should be changed. Kate advocates changing the Lord's Prayer to include or substitute "Our Mother." She says, "I think it's great…it's a step in the right direction." For Marie, interpreting the text to be either non-gendered or all-gendered—regardless of the perceived gender attached to the language used—is enough to move beyond the question of changing the beginning of the text.

Contrary to Marie and Kate, Heidi is firm in her belief that the Lord's Prayer should not be altered in any way. She says, "I understand the sort of political aspect behind feminists wanting to change this male-dominated language…it is really language, and not a symptom of spirituality or the church." In her mind, the love of God and the quest for spiritual growth transcends feminist political action. This perspective is illustrative of a significant source of variation in these women's lives: Christian doctrine has priority over some feminist ideals and not others.

Fourth, and related to list last point, these women engage in what I term "selective religiosity"—emphasizing the parts of the Christian tradition that work well with their feminist ideals, and de-emphasizing the parts that do not. Kate illustrates this point well, saying

> …[W]hat would be considered a sin, I don't consider a sin…I don't wanna make judgments, that baffles me that you can…take something where almost all of your life choices are considered sins and then ask for redemption from them…I wouldn't wanna be a part of that…I'm lucky that my church is willing to accept a different sort of lifestyle.

Kate's statement, while more explicit regarding the editing out of Christian discourse that is contrary to her feminist beliefs, is illustrative of a tailored version of religiosity evident for all three women. Kate puts it succinctly: "I've had to take what I can believe and adapt what I can't to fix what I can buy into."

The common thread in the development of a selective religiosity is the continued questioning of ideals, beliefs, and practices. Heidi states that she has "never been able to accept what somebody tells me at face value, because I've always questioned my whole life—everything—and so, with Christianity, it wasn't gonna be any different." Marie agrees, noting what she calls the folly of being anchored in a set of black and white beliefs rather than in a commitment to personal growth. Spiritual and personal development occur through continued questioning, and, stated Heidi, "…the church was meant to be a group of thinking people…it's important that we never stop thinking—always keep searching our hearts, and keep searching for the wisdom of God through prayer."

For all three women this kind of questioning leads to a selective or edited version of Christianity, achieved in large part through a feminist lens. Integration of Christian and feminist identities requires questioning and challenging the basis of belief structures, non-exclusive membership in any particular church, and the vulnerability involved in being open to new learning experiences. Through this process a new, feminist Christian discourse develops.

Regardless of the apparent work involved in the creation of a new discourse of feminist Christianity, Heidi indicates that the two perspectives are a strong match, saying, "…it's just welded together really well…I am a feminist from the point of view of not wanting to be treated any differently on account of being a woman…for this world, as well as in the church, and in any other aspect…" She credits Christianity and the love of God with helping her to love herself as she is, improve her body image, and move past her feelings of anger. Heidi expresses Christianity as a way of healing gendered injustice; this differs from Kate and Marie, who see themselves as more oriented to social justice initiatives, including political action against the agents of the ruling relations.

In sum, analysis of the Lord's Prayer as an institutional text brought forward a larger discussion of dissonant as well as complementary feminist and Christian ideals, ending with a description of how these women manage to balance the discourses associated with each. More research is necessary to completely explore the disjuncture between the two and the different manners in which women are able to incorporate both Christian and feminist discourses into their everyday experiences. Trans-local settings involved in the activation of the text extend into women's everyday/everynight existence and back out again; they pray the Lord's Prayer alone and/or

socially, feeling a connectedness with Christians worldwide and with society at large.

Further, text-mediated decision making by these women reflects the ruling interests in their accedence to the perceived supremacy of either feminist or Christian ideologies in various social contexts. The text in question organizes these women's experiences individually as well as socially, in that it provides instruction for how they are to pray, regardless of their company or location. In the context of these women's various situations, the similarities of their responses to the Lord's Prayer—and to Biblical text generally—may indicate the development of a new, feminist Christian discourse.