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Genres of Reading/Genres of Agency:
An Ethnography of Protestant Women's Reading Groups

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Abstract

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For this dissertation, I conducted fieldwork in five different groups of Protestant women at three churches in Atlanta, GA. The three churches I selected represent a variety within American Protestantism in terms of race, class, age and theology. Despite these differences between the groups, I found similarities in the reading practices of the groups that correspond to the genres of reading material the groups used. Thus my dissertation explores how genres of religious texts engender genres of reading practices and how genres of reading practices that women bring to the discussion shape their experiences of the texts. In order to illustrate the interaction between genres of texts and genres of reading practice within my dissertation manuscript, I combine an ethnographic narrative with reflection on theories the role of the other in the formation of the self in feminist philosophy and theories of reading and interpretation drawn from philosophical hermeneutics. Specifically, I engage the work of Linda Martín Alcoff, Wendy Brown, Adriana Cavarero, Lois McNay, Cynthia Willett, and Linda Zerilli in feminist philosophy; and the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur in philosophical hermeneutics.

By focusing on genres of religious reading across diverse groups of American Protestants, my project offers an alternative to the dichotomy of autonomy and heteronomy that persists in the study of gender and religion in American Protestantism. The genres of reading that are featured in the dissertation—resonating with the stories of others, struggling with and wallowing in doctrinal texts, playfully imagining oneself in biblical narratives, and defining boundaries through reading religious others—do not lend themselves to simple categorization in terms of limiting or facilitating women's agency. I argue that approaches to agency that attempt to disentangle the self and the other by determining whether the self is the cause (autonomous) or the other is the cause (heteronomous) of any given effect miss modalities of agency in Protestant women's reading practices. These modalities of interactions between individuals and different kinds of others represent different characteristics of co-agency that co-determine religious effects and co-construct the religious self.

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**Introduction:
Protestant Women's Agency and Religious Reading Practices**

On a Tuesday evening in mid-January, a group of four women in their twenties gathered in Emily's studio apartment, about half of the group's usual number. Christina, who was the leader of the group, shared that she was reading Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church*, in which Taylor describes the limits of ordained ministry, and that she was wondering if her decision to enter ordained ministry would make it difficult to find a mate.¹ After lingering over the snacks in the beginning part of the meeting, spending extra time catching up and seeming a little reluctant to begin the discussion, the group ended up having a lively and lengthy discussion about a series of vignettes about Jesus and his teaching in the book of Mark. Christina asked which parts of the chapters for that day the group wanted to discuss and the other women in the group were interested in sections where Jesus argues with the Pharisees about divorce, blesses little children, and curses a fig tree.² The discussion of the passage about divorce started off the conversation on a difficult note. Jesus argues against divorce saying, "what God has joined together, let no one separate," and this text has traditionally been used to prohibit divorce, but the women in the group knew several couples who were divorced.³ Sarah thought that maybe the text was making a distinction between legal marriage and spiritual marriage, in other words divorce might be okay for non-Christians. But Emily countered that her own parents had gotten married with the intention of "being one" in spiritual marriage but still they had gotten divorced. The women were at

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

² Mysterion meeting, January 12, 2010. The majority of this conversation is reconstructed from notes. The texts mentioned in this discussion were Mark 10:1-16 and Mark 11:12-14. This group used a variety of versions of the Bible.

³ Mark 10:9 (New Revised Standard Version)

an impasse, because the text was clearly stating a position that neither they nor their communities seemed to uphold.

In the next part of the chapter, people were bringing little children to Jesus to bless and Jesus used this moment to say that one must enter the kingdom of God as a child or not enter at all. In response to Christina's question about what it meant to be a child in this context, Sarah said that she thought that being a child was about being dependent and that this text meant that the self-sufficient person could not enter the kingdom of God. Diane agreed and said that her sister-in-law had told her that children need attention more than they need food. Diane felt that she goes about her own business too much and she should crave God's love as a child would. Sarah added to that image that being a child was not to be in a position of power, that children are the ultimate people without power, and so to enter the kingdom of God one had to be powerless. Everyone in the discussion seemed to feel positively about this vignette and that becoming like a child to enter the kingdom of God was something they endeavored to do.

The discussion was interrupted for a little bit as Emily's newly adopted and anti-social cat hissed at Sarah on her way to the restroom, but the discussion quickly got back to the section of the text that had been mentioned as odd from the outset. The women in this group could not understand why Jesus would have cursed a fig tree, since so much of his activity had been blessing and healing, and furthermore, why Jesus would expect there to be figs on the fig tree when it was not the right season. Christina suggested that it seemed like Jesus was "just throwing a temper tantrum."⁴ Diane imagined herself in Jesus's place and thought that maybe he was just getting anxious and exasperated because it was getting close to the time of his crucifixion. Emily had a note in her Bible that the fig tree was supposed to

⁴ Mysterion meeting, January 12, 2010.

be a symbol for Israel and Christina offered a note from the commentary she had on Mark that said that this has been read to refer to those in Israel who did not respond to Jesus's message. Sarah said that if that was so, then Jesus's expectation that there be figs when it was not the right season suggested that he had not given up on those people and still wanted them to accept his message anyway. Sarah's interpretation seemed like a good enough explanation for this quizzical text and the rest of the discussion devolved into a discussion about how many types of figs there were and how Emily would have tons of figs in season because there was a fig tree on the property of her apartment complex. The discussion had already run very late and so the women in this group shared their prayer requests and hurried home after praying quickly for these requests and for the women who had not been able to make the meeting that night.

This discussion of a few sections towards the end of the book of Mark displays many of the reading strategies that I observed over nine to twelve months of attendance in five Protestant women's reading groups. Christina shared the way that events in her own life were resonating with what she was reading in a spiritual memoir. This kind of sharing and reciprocal interpretation of life narratives was a big part of what happened in the gathering times before the textual discussions. In chapter one, I discuss how the sharing of personal examples occasioned this kind of interpretation and built intimacy among the women in these groups. Also, the women both accepted some parts of the texts as models for their own religious perspectives and struggled with others parts that did not match their experiences of the world. These are strategies of reading that I describe as wallowing in and struggling with particularly theological and doctrinal texts in chapter two. Along with engaging the content of Jesus's teachings (doctrine), the women in this small group also discussed Jesus's actions

and the narrative context of the story being told. In chapter three, I describe the way that this group and another imagined themselves as the characters in the text and how this practice is particularly tied to narrative texts in the Bible. The group did not spend time defining the boundary between religious insiders and outsiders in this discussion, but as I discuss in chapter four, the relationship between Christianity and other religious groups was also a prominent feature of this group's discussions together.

The plurality of reading strategies present in this vignette also makes it unclear how feminist scholars should interpret the effects of the reading strategies these women use. How should we categorize these women's engagement with their religious tradition and with each other during this discussion? Are these women accepting, rejecting or modifying the liberal Protestant tradition? How are they affected by each other's interpretation of Jesus's teachings and actions? Should we be concerned by their embrace of the need to be "powerless" like children as part of their religious experience? Obviously, these questions cannot be answered from this short vignette, but they represent the questions that collective practices of religious reading pose for feminist discussions of women's identity and agency. Descriptions of religious women from a feminist perspective have struggled to resist categorizing women's religious participation as either resistance or acquiescence to the norms of religious tradition, either overly romanticizing women's agency within religion or casting women's religious participation as detrimental to women's agency. This excerpt from a women's religious reading group exemplifies the ways that the intersubjective processes of religious identity are messy and resist categorization.

This dissertation focuses on Protestant women's reading groups in order to move beyond the categorization of women's religious identity as an abdication of agency to an

other (whether the other is seen as the divine or a social other like religious tradition) or the free exercise of agency against or in spite of an other. Religious reading groups foreground the intersubjective processes of religious identity construction within and through the collective practices of reading. As the vignette of the group reading Mark suggests, the presence of other women complicates the strict opposition between the individual and the shaping force of religious traditions since women engage the interpretations and experiences of the other women while reading together. At the same time, religious traditions exert influence through the texts that are read and the selection of reading material and even provide lenses through which to read the texts. Bible studies and other religious reading groups are among the types of small groups within religious communities where the formation of individual religious perspectives through communal processes is most visible. This interaction of the individual with the community brings into focus the role of various ‘others’ in the process of identity construction, both the others that take the form of other women and the other that is represented by the texts and the religious traditions themselves. Furthermore, this dissertation addresses a problem with describing and evaluating the agency of religious women, and argues that the concern with the threat of the other and a need to locate the cause and effect of agency are at the root of this problem. The reading practices of the Protestant women in this dissertation represent modalities of co-agency and different styles of engagement with the “other.” Therefore, I argue that instead of a model of agency in which agency is attributed only to the self or the “other,” the agency of religious women is better understood within a model in which multiple agents co-construct the self and social outcomes.

The Problem of Religious Women's Agency

Scholars of religious women have struggled most openly with the problem of religious women's agency and two historians of religious women have articulated this problem particularly cogently. Amy Hollywood in her article "Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography" acknowledges the difficulty for "a twenty-first century feminist historian to take seriously Mechthild of Magdeburg's claim that God speaks directly through her."⁵ Hollywood describes how recent scholarship seeking to recover the agency of historical women, including her own, has interpreted the rhetorics of femininity and submission used by medieval women in terms of producing agency and authority. Hollywood, however, sits with the tension between the facts that the medieval women ascribe agency to the divine and that modern feminist scholars explain this rhetoric as a practice of claiming authority. This gap between the explanation of the religious person and the explanation of the social science researcher seems to be a feature of religious experience itself, since religious experience itself is not adequately explained by naturalistic categories of thought. Hollywood finds the same struggles with divine agency in discussions about subaltern history in the postcolonial context, where "the subaltern ascribes the agency for their rebellion to some God" and yet to ascribe any real agency to the supernatural goes "against the rules of evidence that give historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past."⁶ Hollywood argues, with Dipesh Chakrabarty, that taking seriously the claims to divine agency in Mechthild's text involves the possibility of the recognition of the truth of those beliefs and will disrupt our accounts of history. She asks, further,

⁵ Amy Hollywood, "Gender, Agency and the Divine in Religious Historiography," *Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 516.

⁶ *Ibid*, 520. Hollywood is quoting from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 103.

“should we assume that agency, as understood within secular historiography, is the only way in which to think about politics (either in the past or in the present)? If it is not, what happens to the very demand to make the other an agent of history that dominates the projects of subaltern and feminist history themselves?”⁷

Hollywood recognizes that the intractableness of the problem of describing and explaining religious women’s experiences and accounts of agency is not only due to the attribution of divine agency in these accounts, but also a result of the feminist desire to recuperate the agency that women seem to hand over to the divine. This paradox challenges the heart of her feminist scholarly project and Hollywood encourages scholars to be attentive to the disruptions that religious women’s experience provides for social scientific research.

Phyllis Mack in an article in *Signs* goes further and argues that the almost total silence of feminist theorists on the subject of religion and agency implies a negativity about religion that leads to ignorance about the roles of religious women in the development of modernity.⁸ She argues that for secular scholars to understand the relationship between religion and agency, we must confront the conception of agency “not as the freedom to do what one wants but as the freedom to do what is right.”⁹ The 18th-century Quaker women that Mack studies endeavored to conform themselves to God’s desires and only then to become God’s agent in the world. According to Mack, “if we think of agency as comprising both the capacity for effective action and the free choice to act, we might say that Quaker women’s actions were effective but not intentional (or more accurately, that they saw their intentions as inspired by and identical with God’s).”¹⁰ Furthermore, Mack demonstrates that the activity of these Quaker women in the public sphere promoted ideas about universal

⁷ Amy Hollywood, “Gender, Agency and the Divine in Religious Historiography,” 528.

⁸ Phyllis Mack, “Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism,” *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 150.

⁹ *Ibid*, 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

human rights, but with the energy that came from the transformation of the quality of their religious life. Their stories “call into question the traditional narrative of modernity in which religion is viewed as an interesting but anachronistic phenomenon that is essentially marginal to the main story.”¹¹ Mack’s article, again, points out that the difficulty that feminist thought has with religion is connected to religious accounts of agency and that attention to religious women disrupts the neatly ordered narratives within secular feminist scholarship.

Although scholars of 20th-century American religious women have not embarked on theoretical accounts of religious women’s agency, they treated religion as essentially imbricated in the development of modernity or post-modernity in the U.S. These scholars have also been attentive to the problem of the location of the agency in religious women, particularly in the concern to represent with equanimity women that fall outside of the academic feminist experience, such as evangelical women. These scholars of religion have worked to avoid dichotomizing women’s religious agency as resistance or subordination and have often attempted to walk the tightrope of respecting the religious perspectives of the religious practitioner while bringing the outsider’s perspective of the researcher to bear on the analysis of religious practice. This struggle is partly a permutation of the desire to protect religious phenomena from reduction into the effects of social or other forces, but the need for balance between insider and outsider perspectives takes on a different exigency in the case of representing non-feminist or non-mainstream religious perspectives. Scholars who have focused on conservative religious women in particular have aimed to represent the religious lives of women without painting a picture of extreme otherness. Marie Griffith and Lynn Neal have done an exemplary job of humanizing, as it were, the perspectives of conservative

¹¹ Phyllis Mack, “Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism,” 160.

religious women in their studies of charismatic prayer practices and the reading of evangelical romance novels, respectively.¹² The women of the Women's Aglow Fellowship that Griffith describes, like Mechtild and Mack's 18th-century women, invoke the rhetorics of submission as empowering their religious and personal lives. Yet Griffith also claims that the discourses that these women use limits their agency as well as encourages it. Robert Orsi in *Thank You St. Jude* describes the prayer practices of Catholic women who were outside of the mainstream of American religious life and whose relationships to St. Jude were seen as regressive by many in the church hierarchy.¹³ Similarly, Orsi describes the relationship with St. Jude as one that accompanies women as they moved between the domestic, familial and work spheres of their lives. This "in-between" character of women's religious experience in this case makes it difficult to locate women's agency in and the effectiveness of praying to St. Jude. Both of these approaches indicate the complexity in tracing women's religious agency and the difficulty of placing religious women's experience into categories of "good" or "bad" for the women themselves.

Additionally, scholars of African-American women and religion have more explicitly taken up the task of tracing the contours of African-American women's agency in religious participation. Marla Frederick situates her study of African-American women's spirituality and activism in the controversy of whether or not Christianity is a help or a hindrance to combating racial oppression.¹⁴ Frederick straddles both the anti-reductionist path and the critical path in studies of African-American religion by focusing on spirituality but also

¹² R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹³ Robert Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

evaluating the effectiveness of these women's activism by including an analysis of socio-political character of their community. In contrast, Carolyn Rouse, in her book *Engaged Surrender* about African-American women converts to Islam, seeks to describe agentic participation in the "authorizing discourses" of the tradition without evaluating the effectiveness of conversion at fostering liberation from oppression in a larger socio-economic frame.¹⁵ While I see this dissertation as being located in the discussion of African-American women's religious agency that is represented in the work of both Frederick and Rouse, the methodological approach I will be adopting bears more resemblance to Rouse's focus on women's participation within the respective tradition. Frederick's analysis of the socio-political situation in the rural county she studied was conducted prior to her study of African-American women's spirituality in the same county. In essence, the project on how women's spirituality affected their activism grew out of Frederick's involvement with a larger project and she was able to combine the findings of both projects in her book. One reason I am not following Frederick's methodological approach is that I recognize that an analysis of the complex effects of race, gender and class in the Atlanta area on women's religious participation would be beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, more importantly for my argument, I also share Rouse's concern with the difficulty of determining what outcomes are the effects of women's agentic decisions and which must be attributed to complex material factors outside of the religious traditions under study. Furthermore, I argue that the project of looking for the effects of women's actions as evidence of their agency is based on a model of agency that needs further interrogation.

¹⁵ Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

More sustained theoretical work on the agency of religious women has arisen around the particular problem that the agency of Muslim women outside the U.S. poses for Western scholarship. For example, Elizabeth Bucar's recent work, "Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women," aims at providing a balanced understanding of religious women's agency that encompasses how women work to affirm, innovate and critique the teachings of their religious leaders using the discourses of the tradition.¹⁶ Moreover, Bucar's comparative frame makes the connection between women in the Iranian context "over there" and the American context. Bucar uses the neologism "dianomy" to describe how the rhetorical arguments of the women in her study can contain elements of autonomy and heteronomy at the same time and to describe the process of negotiation between the two. Bucar's conclusions are closest to mine when she argues for dianomy "not only to rehabilitate the actions of conservative women as signs of real agency, but also to understand that even the actions of women perceived as "progressive religious women" (such as Muslims who reject the Islamic veil) are no more creative, or less conforming than those of the women [Marie] Griffith studies."¹⁷ While elegant in its demonstration of how both progressive and conservative women respond to the rhetorical arguments of male clerics, Bucar's project does not necessarily show how non-religious women are similarly constrained as feminist women in their socially-situated perspectives. I want to connect the practices of the religious women in my study, both those progressive and conservative in theology and in terms of gender roles, to an account of the self that explains how raced and sexed identities are not more constrained than any other identities. In other words, I will argue that just as visibly raced and sexed identities are not more constrained

¹⁶ Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), xx.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Bucar, *Creative Conformity*, 8.

than unmarked identities (such as white masculine identity), religious identities are not any more constrained by the social foundations of the self than are secular identities. I also argue in this dissertation that in order to break out of the logic of autonomy/heteronomy in descriptions of the agency of religious women, the dangers assumed to be inherent in heteronomy must be excavated. It is not enough to demonstrate that religious women are not necessarily completely heteronomous in their engagements with religious and social others.

Another work that grapples with the difficulty of describing Muslim women's agency is Saba Mahmood's book *Politics of Piety* in which she analyzes the practices of women in the mosque movement in Cairo.¹⁸ Mahmood's work is notable in that it also sits at the intersection of ethnographic and theoretical work on religious women and addresses the almost complete lack of feminist theorizing on religious women that Mack highlights in her article. Mahmood hopes to shift the characterization of conservative Muslim women's subjectivity away from the realm of the individual will and argues that feminist analyses of women's agency within structures of subordination have persisted in locating agency both in the autonomy of the subject and in the subject's inherent desire to exercise that autonomy in resistance to subordination. According to Mahmood, even the post-structuralist critique of autonomy that is encapsulated in post-structuralism's critique of the transcendental subject championed by the Enlightenment retains this conception of agency. While she acknowledges that she is indebted to post-structuralism in her desire to "[uncouple] the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will," she argues that Judith Butler, as a representative of post-structuralist feminist thought, still maintains a conception of agency

¹⁸ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202-236.

that operates on a model of subordination and subversion.¹⁹ In other words, Butler's work elaborating how gendered norms are consolidated shows how this consolidation also provides the means for destabilization, thus the norms are always cast as negative and resistance and resignification is valued. Mahmood, on the other hand, wants to investigate the multiple ways that norms are inhabited and performed by the women members of the mosque movement in Cairo, redefining their agency in terms of the discursive tradition in which they participate.²⁰

Responding to specific issues in the way that Islamic women have been represented, Mahmood reevaluates the way that the Islamic Revival has been seen as resisting secular-liberal society, arguing that the political project must be understood first in terms of the ethical project by which it is internally defined. Using Foucault's conception of ethics, she argues against the "Kantian legacy" in secular-liberal thought, which decontextualizes moral action down to "the movements of the will" and which is opposed to "the value ascribed to the particular form a moral act took in the Aristotelian worldview."²¹ Consequently, Mahmood focuses her project on describing the logic of moral action that is internal to the mosque movement while acknowledging the ways that the mosque movement is formed by its engagement with secular-liberal society. This strategy highlights the way that the autonomous "movements of the will" have been privileged in the secular-liberal imaginary in which feminist thought participates.

The way that Mahmood's work highlights the problem that women's religious subjectivity poses for secular-liberal feminist thought and how the focus on the will leads to a dichotomous characterization of women's agency as either resistance or subordination is

¹⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 15, 22.

²¹ *Ibid*, 26.

extremely useful. In other words, Mahmood is arguing that the secular-liberal models of agency and the subject do not adequately describe Muslim women in Cairo. Nonetheless, I am arguing that the secular-liberal model of the subject does not adequately describe Protestant women here in U.S. even as they sometimes participate in the construction of the secular-liberal model of the self in their own focus on individual religious experience over the social dimensions of religion. Moreover, although Mahmood recognizes that in Western thought norms are understood to be restrictions on the self, a view that does not accommodate the fact that religious women agency can enact the norms they inhabit, her account does not root out the fact that the norms that originate in an *other* are at the core of the concern with social norms as negative and a site of constraint. The way that secular-liberal society views the social foundations of the self as pernicious in all socially-derived identities, not just religious ones, is lost in Mahmood's focus on exclusively on Muslim women "over there" in Cairo.

In spite of this difference between her conclusions and mine, Mahmood's use of an ethnographic context in order to disrupt and expand theoretical accounts of subjectivity and agency is similar to the approach I use in this dissertation. As it does in all of the work on religious women I have recounted here, anthropologically-inflected work can display complexities and ambiguities "on the ground" that are not always visible in theoretical accounts. In another example of ethnographic work that engages Muslim women and, Azam Torab describes the way in which one of the popular leaders of women's prayer meetings in Tehran "accepts dominant cultural versions of gender, yet also speaks and behaves in ways which contest them."²² Torab's account suggests the explanation for this is that the women

²² Azam Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of *Jalaseh* Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Tehran", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 235.

are multiply constituted and that “a single subject cannot be equated with a single individual.”²³ Torab draws on work in anthropology and gender, explicitly the idea of “unbounded,” “partible” or “divided” selves in the work of Marilyn Strathern and Henrietta Moore’s scholarship on multiple subjectivities.²⁴ Below, I explain that I find Linda Martín Alcoff’s account of a pluritopic hermeneutic self to provide a more comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding religious women’s multiple stances of upholding dominant gender norms while critiquing them. Nonetheless, Torab’s descriptive account is a reminder that anthropological accounts of agency have often pointed out the ways that agency is “complex” in many cultural contexts.

In my final analysis of the ethnographic material I collected in Protestant women’s reading groups, I draw on the insights of another anthropologist whose ethnographic context unsettled the Western accounts of agency. In his articles on Balinese accounts of agency based on fieldwork in the 1960s and 70s, Mark Hobart is mostly concerned with the false dichotomy between individual and collective forms of agency.²⁵ His account of “complex agency,” in which “decisions and responsibility for action involve more than one party in deliberation or action,” describes situations in which individuals and groups of individuals

²³ Azam Torab, “Piety as Gendered Agency,” 238.

²⁴ Azam Torab, “Piety as Gendered Agency,” 238; Henrietta Moore, *A passion for difference: essays in anthropology and gender* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1994); Marilyn Strathern, *The gender of the gift* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988).

²⁵ Mark Hobart, “The Patience of Plants: A Note on Agency in Bali.” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 24 (1990): 90-135; Mark Hobart, “Who Do You Think You Are? The Authorized Balinese” in *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, ed. Richard Fardon (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1990). For an application of Hobart’s complex agency to non-Balinese contexts, see Laurie Patton, “When the Fire Goes Out, The Wife Shall Fast:’ Notes on Women’s Agency in the Asvalayana Grhya Sutra,” in *Problems in Sanskrit and Vedic Literature*, ed. Maitreyee Deshpande (Delhi: New Indian Book Center, 2004), 294-305, and Corinne Kratz, “Forging Unions and Negotiating Ambivalence: Personhood and Complex Agency in Okiek Marriage Arrangement” in *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, ed. Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 2000). I owe my introduction to Hobart’s essays to their engagement with him in their work.

are involved in producing outcomes in a variety of ways, including acting as instruments or patients of someone else. While Hobart does not discuss socially derived identities such as gender, he does discuss Balinese accounts of the activity of ancestors, or divine agents, that leave “it suggestively unclear who disavows or troubles whom, who is agent and who is patient.”²⁶ Ultimately, Hobart’s account will be helpful because of the way that he insists that the particularities of an ethnographic situation disrupt our attempts to impose tidy systems on agency. The collective reading practices in the groups I visited provide anything but tidy accounts of agency in which the effects of actions can be attributed to individuals, social groups, or divine agents. Furthermore, my project explains the link between concerns about the relationship between self and other in identity construction and the fixation on the “effects” of religious women’s actions. In essence, the concern with the apparent heteronomy of religious women is whether the effects of their actions should be attributed to the women themselves or to some other agents outside of the self, such as the divine or other social agents such as religious institutions.

Agency and the Effects of the Other in Feminist Thought

While feminist theoretical works on the subject and agency have not recognized or addressed the problem that is posed to feminist thought by the experience of religious women, I have found a number of thinkers whose work connects the concerns about women’s agency to the role of the other in the formation of the self in ways that are helpful for thinking about religious women’s subjectivity and agency. Much of this work responds to the perception that there is a crisis of agency created by poststructuralist accounts of gender identity in which social relations are the pre-condition for the emergence of the self.

²⁶ Mark Hobart, “Who Do You Think You Are? The Authorized Balinese,” 328.

The worry is that subjectivities that are so thoroughly conditioned by social roles have no ground for critique or resistance. In other words, agency is seen as precluded when subjectivity originates in the influence of others and not within the individual. Feminist theorists Cynthia Willett, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Kelly Oliver respond to this perceived crisis of agency by developing models of subjectivity that re-envision the role of others in the construction of the self. Their works chart an account of individual agency that is both determined by others and open to innovation by individuals.

Cynthia Willett argues in her article “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence” that the continued emphasis on autonomy in analytic feminist frameworks of human rights must be shifted to emphasize the role of social bonds in human flourishing.²⁷ In particular, she critiques the editors of the *Relational Autonomy* volume for restricting the social constitution of the self to early dependence and for assuming that once “the mature individual acquires self-esteem, then she can make choices or otherwise act apart from social norms.”²⁸ In contrast, Willett insists that interactions with others are central in the ongoing formation of personal preferences and our capacity for creative work. She goes so far as to say that “heteronomy nourishes the individual and expands the soul” because “the individual grows with, not in distance from, the community.”²⁹ Therefore, Willett puts forth a model of freedom based on Patricia Hill Collins’ definition of justice as “intense connectedness” that in turn grows out of a reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Audre Lorde’s essay “The

²⁷ Cynthia Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence: Freedom in Analytic, Postmodern, and Pragmatist Feminisms,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* (Spring 2003). See also the expanded version of her argument in “Visionary Pragmatism and the Ethics of Connectivity: An Alternative to Autonomy” in *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, ed. Maurice Hamington and Celia N. Bardwell Jones (New York: Routledge, 2012).

²⁸ Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence,” 121.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

Uses of the Erotic.”³⁰ Lorde’s model differs from the liberal, analytic conception of freedom in that it places creative “erotic” energy rather than the cognitive capacity for reflection at the core of the self and therefore this model cherishes turning outward rather than inward to reflect upon motives and beliefs.³¹ Willett argues that it is not that reflection and critique are not present as part of the person, but they are not necessarily the core capacities vulnerable to oppression. Ultimately, what this model of freedom does is move social relationships to the foreground of the plot of individual subjectivity, instead of leaving them in the background as extrinsic to personal freedom. My project asks along with Willett, what would it look like to celebrate the ways that individuals grow in community, even religious communities, instead of considering such entanglements as a threat to personal freedom?

Kelly Oliver’s work acknowledges that the role of the other in the construction of the self is a deep problem in feminist thought that haunts the contours of gendered subjectivity. In her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, she charges that poststructuralist accounts of identity formation, while they recognize the crucial importance of the intersubjective dimension of the construction of identity, are dominated by a Hegelian paradigm of recognition in which relations with others are a struggle.³² As an alternative to these neo-Hegelian approaches, Oliver constructs a theory of the intersubjectivity of the subject based on the address-ability and response-ability that is paradigmatic of witnessing. Her positive

³⁰ Here Willett is drawing from Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984).

³¹ Willett adds Toni Morrison’s own use of “home” to indicate this connectivity is more of a place than a sentimental love. Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Random House, 1998). Willett argues that “the term ‘home’ names better than does the term ‘love’ that sense of connection that compels the self to encounter sources of meaning and commitment outside the self” (123).

³² Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4.

account of the role of the other in the formation of the self is distinct from other works that locate the self in scenes of address, like Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* and Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives*.³³ Butler considers the originary dispossession of the self into discourse as a lack in the accounts we can give of ourselves. This lack should lead us to an ethic of care when considering the accountability of others, but the lack never becomes a positive trait for Butler. The scenes of address that Adriana Cavarero imagines at the core of the self are those of friendships in which one becomes able to tell each other's personal narratives. In this scene of reciprocal narration, however, Cavarero is deeply concerned about the uniqueness of individuals' stories being lost in "types" of identity that can be shared with others. She is afraid that the recognition of one's social identity will eclipse the self and therefore privileges individual over social forms of identity, even though she defines the self in this deeply interactive context. Since Cavarero's scene of address is closest to the conversational interactions I observed in Protestant women's reading groups, I will engage this problem in Cavarero's work more in depth in chapter one. Nonetheless, both Butler and Cavarero prove Oliver's point that even in theoretical attempts to take the social construction of the self seriously, the definition of the self by social others is seen as a problem to be overcome.

Similarly, Linda Martín Alcoff highlights the way that the social sources of identity are characterized as that which impinge upon the will from outside the self and thus have carried a negative valence in Western thought. Alcoff suggests that resistance to calls for recognition of socially derived identities in political discourse is rooted in fear of living in a world "where the Other, in some cases, holds the epistemic upper hand even over some truths

³³ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000).

about oneself.”³⁴ Alcoff associates this fear with the Enlightenment account of the subject as an abstracted master of all interpretations. Therefore, in *Visible Identities* she constructs an account of the phenomenological-hermeneutic self in which the self does not have mastery over its knowledge by virtue of being situated in a social-historical horizon, but neither does the horizon or the social identity have complete determining power over the self. She argues for a “pluritopic hermeneutics” to describe how individuals are situated in multiple horizons that provide grounds for alternative vision on any particular social horizon.³⁵ Alcoff’s account of raced and gendered identity affirms the social foundations of the self without foreclosing conceptual grounds for agency, avoiding falling on either extreme of a purely autonomous or purely heteronomous selfhood. The hermeneutic foundations of the narrative Alcoff tells about the self are especially appropriate for the setting of religious reading groups where practices of interpretation are a central activity, and I rely heavily on her complex account of the social construction of the subject in my second chapter.

If Oliver and Alcoff are right that the role of the other in the formation of the self has been distrusted in Western thought, feminist thought often included, it should be no surprise that the feminist imaginary has difficulty incorporating the perspectives of religious women whose selfhood is constructed in relationship to a divine other. Furthermore, the very need to create accounts of the social construction of the self that create space for agency points to the fact that the fear of the other is irreducibly connected to the fear of subordination, in other

³⁴ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 84.

³⁵ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 124. Alcoff draws this term from Raimundo Panikkar, “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” in *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. G. J. Larson and E. Deutsch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1988); Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonialization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

words, the fear that the self will be under the control of the other. It is the effects of the other's agency that is at stake in the social construction of the subject. This fear of the other's control also explains the aversion to religious forms of submission in feminist thought, if freedom in feminist thought is fundamentally understood as the freedom from subordination by an other. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood notes the critical nature of this fundamental tenet when she describes "the repugnance that often swelled up inside [her]" in response to the practices of the mosque movement in Cairo, "especially those that seemed to circumscribe women's subordinate status in Egyptian society."³⁶ She "marvels" at her own and progressive feminist scholars' inability to move beyond this visceral reaction.³⁷ Likewise, Marie Griffith, in the introduction to *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, recognizes that evangelical women sometimes elicit a similar response in academic circles. She notes the "heated responses that I have occasionally received in academic settings—responses bidding me to censure evangelical notions of Christian womanhood" and she is aware of the ease in which her endeavors to represent these women in all of their complexity could be misconstrued as anti-feminist.³⁸ Here, the centrality of the fear of subordination and the radicality of Willett's statement that "heteronomy nourishes the individual and expands the soul" begins to be felt.

One solution to the problem that the role of the other in subject-formation causes for feminist accounts of agency is to disconnect theorizing on agency from theorizing on the subject. For instance, Linda Zerilli's work in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* diagnoses the problem of agency as really a problem with the emphasis on the subject in feminist

³⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 37.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 11-12.

theory.³⁹ Zerilli critiques the necessity of defining the socially-derived category of “woman” in order to define who are the feminist “we” as a foundation for political action. She proposes instead a shift into understanding the subject itself in terms of agency, as an “I-can” instead of an “I-will,” by re-reading Hannah Arendt’s definition of the individual as a political being. According to Arendt, the individual always acts in the condition of plurality, which “means that the actor no more controls the effect of her action than she does its meaning, what the action reveals about ‘who’ she is.”⁴⁰ In Zerilli’s reading of her, Arendt holds that “politics, the realm of action, is possible *only* on the condition that there is *no* agent who can begin a process and more or less control its outcome,” in contrast with “the feminist sense of crisis that emerges in relation to the critique of the subject.”⁴¹

I still have reservations about Arendt’s distinction between the “what” of social identity and the unique “who” revealed in action, because religious identity cannot be separated from the “what” of social identity (as neither can race or gender). Nonetheless, Zerilli’s recuperation of Arendt for feminist politics provides a canny critique of the sovereignty of the subject that is feared to be at stake in the social construction of the subject. Zerilli and Arendt agree with Alcoff that in “equating freedom with sovereignty, the Western tradition since Plato...has held plurality to be a ‘weakness,’ at best an indication of our unfortunate dependence on others, which we should strive to overcome.”⁴² However, Zerilli moves beyond Alcoff’s analysis that the other need not be a threat to individual agency in order to point out that the fixation on the effects of action and our ability to control those effects is at the root of the problem. The reality that every deed has effects beyond the doer’s

³⁹ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 16.

control is intensified in the problem of the mixture of individual, divine, and institutional agencies in religious experience. Along with Zerilli in her reading of Arendt, I want to point out the ways in which disengaging the logic of correlating one cause and with one effect is helpful if we are to move beyond the need to define religious women's agency within the logic of resistance or submission.

In highlighting Arendt's "idiosyncratic reading of Kant's third *Critique*" in order to emphasize the role of the imagination in political activity, Zerilli also highlights an aspect of religious activity that is missed when agency is only evaluated in terms of effects.⁴³ In this respect, Lois McNay's attention to the role of the "originary capacity for figuration" in agency and her definition of agency as the capacity to institute new or unanticipated modes of behavior" are also helpful.⁴⁴ In *Gender and Agency*, McNay, like Alcoff, draws upon hermeneutic ideas of the temporality of the self but is more directly focused on creating a theoretical space for agency.⁴⁵ McNay focuses on Ricoeur's account of narrative identity in order to describe how the temporalized self has unity but it is the dynamic unity of change through time. McNay is concerned with describing how gender identity has a durability that resists change, a durability that poststructuralist theories have emphasized, but she creates a model that also explains how change enters into gender identity.⁴⁶ McNay builds on Cornelius Castoriadis description of the radical imaginary in relationship to the social

⁴³ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 29.

⁴⁴ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 21.

⁴⁵ See also Lois McNay, "Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory" *Feminist Theory* 4, no.2 (2003): 139-148.

⁴⁶ In this work, McNay argues that Butler misunderstands how Bourdieu's conception of the field refracts the material determinism in Bourdieu's concept of habitus. McNay sees the dialectic of freedom and constraint in Bourdieu as a useful concept for describing the durability of gender and the possibility of change and in this respect is similar to Alcoff in her understanding of how social identity does not over-determine the individual.

imaginary in order to explain how the capacity for figuration is not simply a form of resistance but is also necessary for the creation of the social imaginary itself. I disagree with the emphasis on change in McNay's account, since the ability to change the conditions in which one lives is certainly predicated on the ability to have an effect on one's surroundings. However, I would like to emphasize the *capacity for figuration*, the ability to imagine alternative realities, as the locus of agency in her account. Figuration is exercised without the need to be translated into effective action and in fact the practice of the imagination is often amplified when walled off from immediate effects. Imaginative acts may have effects on the real, but their effects are difficult to trace and the ability to act need not be proven in terms of visible effects.

Save some brief mention in minor examples, none of the feminist theorists I discussed above deal with the intersection of gendered and religious identity constructions. While, as I indicated in Alcoff's case, these theorists sometimes point to the Enlightenment as the progenitor of the stigma attached to the role of the other in the construction of the self, they do not discuss how this stigma was originally attached to the authority represented as external to the self in religious authority.⁴⁷ The neglect of this connection has not just led to a lack of theorizing on gendered religious identity, but also encouraged the tendency to place religious identity within the realm of the voluntary, which as Mahmood argues is central to the secular-liberal (feminist) conception of the subject. For example, when discussing the distinctive visibility of race and gender identities, Alcoff mentions the way that other identities must be marked by "some form of visible dress code" in political mobilization and uses the examples of the veil, the cross, and Hasidic *payos* along with tattoos, piercings and

⁴⁷ For one location where this connection is explicit see Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?,'" trans. H.B. Nisbet, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54-60.

hairstyles.⁴⁸ While I do not deny her important argument that the bodily visibility is a salient part of the function of raced and gendered identities, her example comes dangerously close to relegating religious identity to the private sphere of personal preference, as somehow less essential to the core of identity like clothing to be taken on and off at will. If religious identity resides in the province of the will in feminist thought, the type of religious subjectivity that “regards subordination to a transcendent will...its coveted goal” is all too easily seen as an abdication of agency on the part of religious women and the transcendent will becomes all the more the threatening other.⁴⁹

Although I do not pretend to reconcile all of the incompatibilities between social scientific perspectives and perspectives in which divine actors contribute to the shaping of reality, I contend that the distrust of the role of the other in subject formation and the related fixation on locating the effects of action in order to determine agency are important loci of difficulty with religious women’s experience in feminist scholarship. Furthermore, Protestant women’s reading groups present an ideal place to parse a variety of interactions between religious women and various “others” that co-construct their religious experiences. The women in these groups connected with individual co-religionists that they encountered both within the groups and in the texts they read. Through their engagements with the texts themselves, the women interacted with the religious perspectives of their respective traditions and other perspectives outside of the religious tradition that are shaped by individual and cultural others. According to the women themselves, the divine other is also engaged through all of these practices of reading as one of the others that co-constructs religious experience. In my analysis, this divine other is present in the speech of the women as they

⁴⁸ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 7-8.

⁴⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 3.

describe their own religious experiences and perspectives. In other words, I will not attempt to isolate these women's engagements with the divine other because the divine other is indirectly present in all of these engagements with various social and textual others.

Essentially, my approach in this dissertation is to evaluate religious identity as a social identity using the theoretical perspectives of the above theorists in order to demonstrate how identities oriented towards a divine other need not be so fundamentally alien to feminist scholarship. The practice of religious reading presents women's religious experience as an engagement with a divine other as one among a plurality of other that shape religious experience. The different styles of engagement with various others evident in their practices of religious reading were shaped by the women's own dispositions toward these others, but also shaped by the reading practice itself. The women in the groups I attended sought to shape themselves into religious subjects by submitting themselves to the authoritative texts they read. Nonetheless, their reading practices produced a multiplicity of effects and were indicative of the plurality of agents involved in producing religious experience. This multiplication of agents and effects makes it difficult to pinpoint relationships of causality in some instances. Even further, some of these reading practices emphasize the imaginative capacities nurtured by reading and ultimately call into question whether or not it is helpful to evaluate religious women's agency in terms of effects at all. I argue that shifting the focus away from the effects of Protestant women's reading practices allows modalities of co-agency to appear in these women's different styles of engagement between self and other in the practice of reading.

The Turn to the Reader, Religious Reading, and American Protestantisms

Long after Roland Barthes' declaration of the death of the author made way for the reader and the theoretical explorations of the reader in reader-response theory, scholarship on readers seems to be gaining momentum.⁵⁰ Literary and book historians are looking for traces and clues to the readers who before had been considered only accessible by inference from the texts themselves. A new database is even cataloguing the physical traces left on the pages of books and manuscripts by historical readers.⁵¹ In the U.S. context, attention to readers in book history has been uncovering readerships that were less visible in the historical archive, such as women, African-Americans, and working-class readers.⁵² One such treatment that is relevant for my project is Mary Kelley's investigation of women's reading circles in the antebellum period, many of which focused on religious topics and were housed in women's seminaries.⁵³ Kelley's article provides evidence that women's reading groups have a long history in the United States of fostering critical thought and action. Kelley argues that Margaret Fuller's "Conversations," which gathered women together beginning in 1839 explicitly to foster cultural production and to prepare women to be shapers

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977). The essay first appeared in 1967 in an English language version in *Aspen*, no. 5-6. For examples of reader-response theory see Jane P. Thompkins, ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Judith Fetterley, *The resisting reader: a feminist approach to American fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

⁵¹ The Reading Experience Database (RED), 1450-1945. A project of the Open University in the UK. <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/> Accessed February 22, 2013.

⁵² For an example of attention to African-American readers see Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For an example of attention to working class readers, see Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

⁵³ Mary Kelley, "'A More Glorious Revolution': Women's Antebellum Reading Circles and the Pursuit of Public Influence" *The New England Quarterly*, 76, no. 2 (2003): 163-196.

of public opinion, were built on the foundation of women's reading circles that began to be formed no later than the 1760s. Beyond this important historical contextualization of Fuller's meetings, and by extension the historical contextualization of the groups at the center for my study, Kelley's findings emphasize that the practices of collective reading had a broad influence for those outside of these circles, since the circles circulated newsletters and newspapers and even funded colporteurs to spread evangelical Protestantism.⁵⁴

Anthropological and sociological approaches to reading have also begun to investigate reading practices through ethnographic and interview methodologies and again have tended to focus on social locations that might have been ignored. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* relies on interviews with devotees and an analysis of the conventions of a genre of text that is derided for being lowbrow and escapist.⁵⁵ Tanya Erzen's recent *Fanpire* has continued Radway's work by studying the readers who are devoted to the *Twilight* series, which is today's derided Harlequin romance and has spawned a whole genre of fiction called "paranormal romance" or "urban fantasy."⁵⁶ Anthropologists, many of whom were initially primarily interested in oral societies and in detailing the transformation of an oral society into a literary one, have also turned the tools of their trade to the practice of reading itself. The fact that "reading" has meant many different things in different places is exemplarily demonstrated in the volume titled *The Ethnography of Reading* edited by

⁵⁴ Mary Kelley, "'A More Glorious Revolution,'" 177-178.

⁵⁵ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). See also Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: the Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁵⁶ Tanya Erzen, *Fanpire: The Twilight Saga and the Women Who Love It* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

Jonathan Boyarin.⁵⁷ Notable in that volume is Boyarin's own essay about an all male Torah study group at an Orthodox yeshiva on New York City's Lower East Side. Boyarin's goal in describing this reading group is to show how traditional authority is not a monolith and how textual authorities are not necessarily more repressive than oral ones, hoping to nuance the anthropological study of Judaism as a textual practice in the process.

Although it has been more than 15 years since the appearance of *The Ethnography of Reading* volume, the field of the ethnography of reading has seen little development in the form of book-length works. The exception is Elizabeth Long's larger research project focusing on book clubs in Houston, TX of which her article in *The Ethnography of Reading* was the preliminary report. The full study has since appeared as *Book Clubs: Women and the Use of Reading in Everyday Life*.⁵⁸ Long's work holds special interest for this dissertation because she focuses on women (and some men) who read together in groups, evaluating the social impact of these gatherings. While intersubjectivity is not the center of her analysis, Long did record many discussions and analyzes the conversation in detail and therefore provides a methodological model for the settings I am endeavoring to study. Long's book and the essays in *The Ethnography of Reading* volume demonstrate the appropriateness and indispensable nature of the method of ethnography for describing and analyzing communal reading practices.

The contribution of my dissertation to this vein of ethnographic scholarship on reading focuses on two areas: the ability of genres of texts to engender different kinds of reading practice and the application of philosophical hermeneutic accounts of interpretation

⁵⁷ Jonathan Boyarin, ed. *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

to particular settings. While the insights of the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics have been applied to a variety of theoretical settings, they have not been brought to bear on an ethnographic inquiry of communal reading practices. Philosophical hermeneutics since Schleiermacher has moved from general theory of textual interpretation to the role of interpretation in the production of social and personal knowledge.⁵⁹ In my project, I demonstrate how the insights of particular thinkers in this tradition illuminate particular kinds of reading practices in the setting of religious reading groups. Wilhem Dilthey's concerns with "lived experience" or the incorporation of events in an individual's life into a meaningful whole (and the expression of that whole in works of art) have explanatory power for the practice of telling and hearing life stories in these Protestant reading groups. In the case of the practices surrounding biblical narrative, Paul Ricoeur's account of how narrative creates a secondary world in which the self imaginatively enters describes how individuals relate to the characters they read about and provides some clarity in the murky discussions about "identification" while reading. On the other hand, not every insight in philosophical hermeneutics seemed to have relevance for the context of my research. For example, Hans Georg Gadamer's thought on the nature of dialogue and how one comes to understanding or agreement in a conversation does not seem quite as helpful in the setting of religious reading groups.⁶⁰ The conversations in these groups are not particularly aimed at coming to an agreement and often bypass completely the goal of resolving one's own opinions about a religious topic.⁶¹ Therefore, I am arguing that greater attention to genres of texts and kinds

⁵⁹ See Anthony C. Thistleton, *Hermeneutics: an Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁶⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method: Second, Revised Edition*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1989).

⁶¹ See James Bielo, "On the failure of 'meaning': Bible reading in the anthropology of Christianity" *Culture and Religion* 9, no. 1 (2008): 1-21. Also see Jody Shapiro Davie's discussion of the role of ambiguity in discussions of spirituality in *Women in the presence: constructing community and*

of interpretive settings would open new avenues for a kind of “pluritopic hermeneutics,” as Alcott proposes to correct the tendency to describe tradition in monolithic terms in Gadamer and to account for the multiplicity of horizons that comprise the contemporary self.⁶² The use of ethnography to describe practices of religious reading offers an engagement with interpretation in all of its particularities and multiplicities and restricts the tendency to construct a monotopic narrative of interpretation itself.⁶³

Within the discipline of religious studies, a turn to the reader has highlighted both the practice of reading and the power dynamics in the institutional contexts of reading. In his introduction to his edited volume *Theorizing Scriptures*, Vincent Wimbush argues that the scholarly exercise of signifying on scriptures is an excavation rather than exegesis, which brings into special focus “the power dynamics involved in but often masked in communication and interpretation.”⁶⁴ The essays in the volume present a wide array of scriptural contexts and methodologies for “excavating” the uses of sacred texts, but a subsequent volume in the *Signifying (On) Scriptures* series focuses on *The Social Life of*

seeking spirituality in mainline Protestantism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). As I discuss in chapter 2, the women in these groups are sometimes hoping for a “fusion of horizons” with the texts that they read, but the process of attaining a fusion of horizons as Gadamer describes it does not describe their strategies for approaching these texts.

⁶² Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 124.

⁶³ The use of ethnography in conjunction with philosophical hermeneutics in this dissertation also contributes to feminist conversations about the usefulness of philosophical hermeneutics for feminist thought. Some feminists have questioned the lack of attention to power in hermeneutical thought as well as philosophical hermeneutics’ ability to address the embodied and plural subjectivities of women. See Lorraine Code ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). Other feminists like Lois McNay and Alcoff have maintained that the thought of Ricoeur and Gadamer can be generative for feminist thought, albeit with strong correctives. In particular, Alcoff argues that the strong emphasis on the irrevocably situated nature of subjectivity in Gadamer’s thought has affinities with the feminist project.

⁶⁴ Vincent Wimbush ed. *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 4.

Scriptures within Christianity.⁶⁵ The pieces in this volume, edited by James Bielo, employ ethnographic methods to describe the uses of the Bible in Christian communities around the world. With the exception of Bielo's contribution to the volume, a selection from his larger project in evangelical group Bible study that I will discuss below, the contributions to this volume primarily focus on how the Bible contributes to the formation of identity in different Christian contexts albeit while describing in detail many ways that the Bible is used to meet those ends.

Paul Griffiths' *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* also excavates the institutional contexts of religious reading in Roman Africa and Buddhist India.⁶⁶ Griffiths' book characterizes religious reading as a practice centered on memorizing and internalizing sacred texts and opposes this type of reading to modern academic "consumerist" reading, which instrumentalizes texts for what can be gleaned from them and then discards them. Griffiths argues that this kind of religious reading is ignored by academics because the consumerist reading model is dominant in academic institutions and because religious reading requires institutions in which to be nurtured in order to flourish. Griffiths' also highlights that the role of authority in selecting the canon of texts appropriate for savoring and memorizing for religious reading poses a stumbling block for modern academic institutions that place a primacy on the autonomy of the individual. Griffiths' restriction of religious reading to premodern institutions and practices does not acknowledge that the practice of "savoring" a text and returning to a text over and over again with

⁶⁵ James Bielo ed. *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Biblicism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009). Velma E. Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012) is the only other volume yet to appear in this series.

⁶⁶ Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

reverence could easily describe academic reading of literary texts. Wesley Kort describes this shift to treating non-Biblical texts as scripture in contemporary literary reading in his book *“Take, Read”*: *Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice*.⁶⁷ I agree that authoritative religious institutions are distinct from secular academic institutions and that the role of authority in religious reading is a stumbling block for many scholarly approaches. Nonetheless, I think that Griffiths draws the distinction between religious and non-religious reading too starkly. For a counter example, the practice of imagining oneself in the text in association with biblical narrative that I describe in chapter three may have similarities with the reading practices associated with fictional narratives, even though I do not explore that connection in this project.

In addition, the study of the institutional and social contexts of religious reading has provided insights into the reading practices in women’s contexts. While there are a few essays in the *Theorizing Scriptures* and *The Social Life of Scriptures* volumes that interrogate gender and Christianity, many of the studies on the reading practices of religious women have highlighted non-Christian religions.⁶⁸ For instance, Pieterella Van Doorn-Harder’s *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur’an* investigates the different interpretive strategies in two different Muslim women’s movements. These organizations are shaped by the larger Reformist or traditional Islamic institutions in which they are situated and intersect with governmental and non-governmental initiatives around women’s roles in

⁶⁷ Wesley A. Kort, *“Take, Read”*: *Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

⁶⁸ In *The Social Life of Scriptures*, see especially Erica Muse, “Chinese American Christian Women of New England: Transformation and Continuity in Inter-Generational Narratives of Living in Christ” for gender ideologies in the contested Biblicism of Chinese evangelicals in Boston (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

Indonesia.⁶⁹ Another study of interest is Laurie Patton's "The Cat in the Courtyard: The Performance of Sanskrit and the Religious Experience of Women," which presents preliminary conclusions drawn from Patton's interviews with women Sanskritists in Maharashtra.⁷⁰ Patton draws on performance studies approaches that argue for more flexibility and improvisation in ritual performance to show how Sanskrit's use in ritual and domestic contexts by women constitutes living language. She proposes that this is a "gentler form of innovation," where the cat that represents tradition is welcomed by women Sanskritists.⁷¹ For Patton and Van Doorn-Harder, religious women's textual and interpretive practices open up our understanding of what it means to participate in evolving traditions of religious reading. The dynamism that they describe in both the larger traditions of reading and women's contributions to tradition is also present in the Protestant women's reading groups I visited.

Scholarship on American Protestantism has also turned to the significance of reading practices, led by the growth of the anthropology of Christianity on the one hand and the "lived religion" approach of American religious historians on the other.⁷² Until very

⁶⁹ Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁷⁰ Laurie L. Patton, "The Cat in the Courtyard: The Performance of Sanskrit and the Religious Experience of Women" in *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷¹ Laurie L. Patton, "The Cat in the Courtyard," 31.

⁷² Current work in the anthropology of Christianity is focused on communities in a variety of global contexts in order to create a cross-cultural body of research. See James Bielo *The Social Life of Scriptures*, 3; Fenella Cannell, *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson ed. *The limits of meaning: case studies in the anthropology of Christianity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For the lived religion approach in American religious history see works by Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *Thank You, St. Jude*; R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters and Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven:

recently, the only major studies conducted about small groups as a general phenomenon in American religion focused on their effect on spirituality in American religion rather than the interpretive practices often at their center.⁷³ However, the recognition that reading is central to the formation of American Protestant identity has recently shifted scholarly focus onto readers rather than the producers of religious texts (such as preachers or theologians).⁷⁴

This shift has been especially prominent in scholarship on American evangelicalism, which has traditionally defined itself as having a distinctive relationship to the Bible. A number of historical works have explored the role of Bible distribution and religious publishing in the construction of American evangelical identity.⁷⁵ Using an anthropological approach, Brian Malley's ethnographic study of an evangelical congregation describes literalism as a species of belief tradition that is transitively related to the Bible rather than a

Yale University Press, 1995); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, Mark R. Valerie eds. *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

⁷³ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1994); Robert Wuthnow ed. *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Jody Shapiro Davie, *Women in the Presence*, 1993.

⁷⁴ The texts of women preachers' sermons have not gotten the same circulation as the texts of male preachers historically or in contemporary times. Therefore, the interpretive practices of women preachers might be more productively categorized as lay reading, even though these women are producing oral and written texts. See Elaine J. Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) and *Women Preaching Revolution: Calling for Connection in a Disconnected Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁷⁵ See especially Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: the Story of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). Also of interest is Daniel Vaca's unpublished dissertation manuscript on evangelical publishing in the 20th century and the creation of evangelical identity.

tradition of hermeneutic practices.⁷⁶ In his analysis, literalism functions as a symbol of specific beliefs and as a badge of community identity. James Bielo's study of evangelical Bible studies in Lansing, Michigan looks closely at collective reading practices as an important locus for the production of and reflection on evangelical identity.⁷⁷ He highlights the textual ideology surrounding the Bible, the importance of cultivating intimacy, textual economies in which non-biblical religious texts are read, and the activity of preparing to witness to non-evangelicals as the processes of evangelical identity construction that are predominate in evangelical Bible studies. Bielo's methodology is similar to mine in that he uses verbatim transcripts of the study discussions and he compares the reading practices of groups across congregational contexts.

Recent studies of evangelical women's reading practices have employed primarily interview methodologies to explore the practices of individual readers. Lynn S. Neal's *Romancing God*, a study of women who read and write evangelical romance novels, provides a window into an evangelical genre that is not respected by evangelical elites or larger literary circles.⁷⁸ Neal's work creatively weaves together historical analysis, narrative analysis of the novels themselves, correspondence between readers and authors, and interview and focus group data in order to explain how the women in these groups read for pleasure and in order to affirm their evangelical identity. I engage Neal's representation of these women's reading practices as "identification" and "inspiration" in chapter three, where I argue that imagining oneself as a character is more complex than she describes. Amy

⁷⁶ Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

⁷⁷ James Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁷⁸ Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Johnson Frykholm analyzes the predominantly women readers within another subculture of evangelical literature in *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*.⁷⁹ She argues that reading the *Left Behind* series of books serves as a means for negotiating concerns about a number of controversial issues, including gender roles, consumerism, secularism, and technology. Frykholm also demonstrates that these fictional narratives have significant religious impacts, even to the point of affecting the readers' interpretation of the Bible. Both Frykholm and Neal focus solely on evangelical genres and individual readers, nevertheless their insights into the relationship between fiction and religious reading are integral to my analysis in chapter three.⁸⁰

Although somewhat lagging behind the scholarship on evangelical readers, the scholarship on the reading practices of liberal Protestants has also begun to grow as scholars have begun to remedy their neglect of liberal Protestantism.⁸¹ The most prominent is Matthew Hedstrom's recently published *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, which looks at the national religious reading initiatives in the period after World War I as building the significant cultural influence of liberal Protestant forms of spirituality.⁸² Up until Hedstrom's work was published, scholarship on liberal Protestant reading practices has been restricted to article-length works and a few chapters in the edited volume *Religion and the*

⁷⁹ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁰ Frykholm does interview non-evangelical readers of the series, though the core audience for the *Left Behind* books is white and evangelical.

⁸¹ See recently published Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey ed. *American Religious Liberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012) and Pamela E. Klassen, *Spirits of Protestantism: Medicine, Healing, and Liberal Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Both volumes recognize this neglect and seek to address it.

⁸² Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Matthew Hedstrom, "Reading Across the Divide of Faith: Liberal Protestant Book Culture and Interfaith Encounters in Print, 1921-1948" in *American Religious Liberalism*.

Culture of Print in Modern America.⁸³ I am also aware of a few ethnographic works in progress, including Erin Smith's study of readers of *The Da Vinci Code* and Rebekka King's ethnography of the reading practices of a liberal Protestant congregation in Canada.⁸⁴ The invisibility of the publishing and reading practices of liberal Protestants may have been masked by their influence on mainstream publishing and by the relationship between American secularism and unmarked Protestantism.⁸⁵ Therefore, Kathryn Lofton's chapter on Oprah's Book Club in her book *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* is particularly astute in its discussion of the similarities between religious reading and the types of reading practices that Oprah encourages through her wildly successful book club.⁸⁶

All of these resources on religious reading in both evangelical and liberal forms of American Protestantism have been extremely useful to me as I have sought to describe the salient features of religious reading within the Protestant women's groups I attended. Nonetheless, the striking similarities in some of the reading practices I observed across the varieties of Protestantism of these groups suggests that features of and cultural currents that are shared in American Protestantism are missed if we focus solely on the ways in which

⁸³ See Erin A. Smith, "'What Would Jesus Do?' The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace," *Book History* 10 (2007); "The Religious Book Club: Print Culture, Consumerism, and the Spiritual Life of American Protestants Between the Wars" in *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, ed. Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); "'Jesus My Pal': Reading and Religion in Middlebrow America" *Canadian Review of American Studies: Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 37, no. 2 (2007). Also of interest, though not focused on reading practices per se is Kathryn Lofton's article "The Methodology of the Modernists: Process in American Protestantism" *Church History*, 75, no. 2 (2006): 374-402.

⁸⁴ Erin A. Smith's above articles are related to a larger project titled *What Would Jesus Read?: Scenes of Religious Reading and Writing in Twentieth-Century America* that includes an ethnographic component. Rebekka King, "The Academe, the Author and the Atheist: Bourdieu and the Reception of the Study of Religion" *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41, no 1. (2012): 14-19.

⁸⁵ See Tracy Fessenden's *Culture of Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) for an exposition of this relationship in American literature. I discuss the connection between interiorized definitions of Protestant identity and Protestantism as an unmarked social identity in the public sphere in chapter four.

⁸⁶ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: the Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Kindle edition.

religious reading contributes to a particular group identity. Certainly, the institutional contexts of the groups I attended created significant differences between the groups, especially in terms of the definitions of religious insiders and outsiders as I discuss in chapter four. Also, as I discuss in chapter two, there are differences in the understanding of the relationship between the authority of the Bible and historical-critical scholarship on the Bible in the groups I attended, but the reading practices themselves did not differ as much as the ideological differences between these groups would suggest. Again, here questions about genre categories that are shaped in shared currents of American publishing might be more relevant than the ideological discourses within and between American Protestantisms about biblical interpretation.

I also selected groups from a variety of locations within American Protestantism in order to shift the perceptions of particular forms of Protestantism and their relationship to the “mainstream.” For instance, African-American Protestants are often studied in terms of their distinctiveness from other forms of Protestant Christianity. In chapter four, I discuss how the African-American group in my study was pragmatically open to religious outsiders in a way that continues an African-American Protestant tradition of connecting religious and social forms of participation in the public sphere and in a way that is distinct from the approaches of the white Protestant groups. At the same time, however, this group used a Bible study series created by a white evangelical woman, seemed comfortable with liberal perspectives about the authority of the Bible, and engaged in reading practices prevalent in both liberal and evangelical white Protestant groups.⁸⁷ In other words, the African-American group in my

⁸⁷ Lynn Neal and Amy Johnson Frykholm also include a small number of African-American women among their interviewees and their respondents indicate that at least a small number of African-American women participate in evangelical fictional subcultures.

study participated in mainstream Protestantism just as much as the other groups in my study even though they also participated in distinctive forms of African-American Protestantism.

Furthermore, despite the white evangelical groups in my study's intentional self-identification as in conflict with mainstream culture and scholars' tendency to place evangelicals outside of the "mainline" of 20th-century Protestantism, the white evangelical groups participated in mainstream definitions of "good" and "bad" religion shared in secular and Protestant culture. Namely, the white evangelical groups in my study privilege interiorized definitions of authentic religious experience that demonize social and cultural forms of religious belonging in similar ways to the white liberal Protestant groups I attended. Even though these groups draw boundaries between themselves and religious outsiders differently, both in terms of who the outsiders are and how and whether they should be included and in terms of different positions in relationship to feminism, they both operate with definitions of "good" religion and "bad" religion that are shared in secular feminist spheres. Finally, by including the liberal Protestant groups in my study, I hope to add to the growing literature on liberal Protestantism and to help move it from the periphery of scholarship on American Protestantism even as we interrogate its continuing "dominant" status within society.

Methods and Research Settings

As I mentioned above, I intentionally selected groups for participant observation that represented distinct varieties of American Protestantism. I identified churches that had women's reading groups or Bible studies by looking at their websites, attending Sunday morning services for the printed and verbal announcements, or on the recommendations of

colleagues or acquaintances. The latter two avenues proved to be the most productive, since church websites are not always maintained and even clergy are not always up to date on the meeting times and practices of groups in which they themselves are not always involved. Initially, I had hoped to also include a Spanish-speaking congregation in the project and I visited a Spanish-speaking congregation several times who would have agreed to be part of my project, but the logistics of including cross-linguistic analysis proved too difficult for an already ambitious study, especially considering my Spanish-speaking ability is not fluent.

Besides looking for a diversity of Protestant traditions and denominations, I looked for groups that met at least every other week, since a monthly meeting would attenuate the fieldwork portion of my research. I also eliminated groups that did not include reading in some form and mixed gender groups. These three criteria for selection limited greatly the options for groups in white liberal Protestant and African-American churches. I found in my preliminary investigations that both of these traditions were more likely to have monthly meetings of women's groups whose activities might not center on reading or Bible study. This variable is likely due to vestiges of denomination-wide women's auxiliary organizations that were autonomous denominations within their denominational structure and whose activities mirrored the activities of denominations in terms of organizational and missionary activity.⁸⁸ Christian education classes that met weekly before or after the main worship service were most often mixed-gender groups and often had the character of a lecture on a

⁸⁸ See the conclusion of Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) for the importance of these organizations for achieving women's ordination. See also for information on these groups in the specific denominations in my project: Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983); Jualynne E. Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 99-110.

topic than a collective reading practice.⁸⁹ Moreover, from my inquiries at a number of African-American churches of different denominations, the term “Bible study” most often meant a service on Wednesday nights held in the sanctuary in which the pastor gave a lesson. As an example in this vein of African-American practice, I attended a women’s Bible study at a large African-American church of the same denomination as Quinn Temple that met monthly and was held in a chapel space. The woman who led the group basically delivered a sermon to the roughly 30 women who attended. Two of the groups I attended, the Quinn Temple group and the Breathing Space Wednesday group, also had more of a lesson format for part of the time I attended, though the much smaller number of attendees created space for increased discussion among the participants and interaction with the group leader.⁹⁰ Therefore, while the groups I selected are typical of women’s reading groups, I could not say that they represented the majority of women’s small groups.⁹¹

In the end, groups from a large white liberal Protestant church, a medium-sized white evangelical Protestant church and a small solo pastorate African-American denominational church agreed to participate in my project.⁹² Therefore, beginning in August 2009 and

⁸⁹ I went to a Sunday morning class at an African-American church in which the leader read from a thematically oriented study guide. I also attended a class at Westminster Presbyterian church on the topic of death in Christian thought, taught by a seminary professor. See Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 69-70, for the difference between Sunday School classes and “Bible studies” that meet at other times during the week.

⁹⁰ The Quinn Temple group was using a Beth Moore video series accompanied by a workbook for the first section of the time I attended. The Breathing Space Wednesday group was essentially taught by Vicky when they were studying Romans.

⁹¹ Robert Wuthnow, in *Sharing the Journey*, talks about the number of different kinds of support groups in the U.S. including Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and “special interest” groups like book/discussion groups, but his analysis does not separate groups out by gender. In his count, Bible studies account for a quarter of such support groups, 68.

⁹² I have restricted myself to Protestant churches and did not seek out any Catholic churches, although there is nothing to say that there are not women’s reading groups among Catholics. Nonetheless, lay reading of the Bible and meeting in small groups has been seen as a distinctly Protestant practice going all the way back to Calvin. Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 41; Wesley A. Kort, “Take, Read”: *Scripture, Textuality and Cultural Practice*, 19-36.

ending in September 2010, I regularly attended five women's groups at these three churches for a total of 114 meetings and recorded majority of them (93 meetings). The Breathing Space groups at the evangelical Heights Neighborhood Church met only during the school year, so I attended 15 and 21 meetings of these two groups.⁹³ The African-American Quinn Temple group likewise stopped meeting during the summer to make time for the summer camp the church ran and so I attended 20 of their meetings. The Mysterion and Dames and the Divine groups at the liberal Westminster Presbyterian Church did not stop for the summer, but the group of younger women, Mysterion, met every other week, so I attended their group for 24 meetings and the Dames and the Divine for 34 meetings. I visited each church at least three times for a Sunday service and attended several other church events that seemed connected to the groups I was attending, like a women's retreat organized by the Heights Neighborhood Church. I went to these "peripheral" activities in order to understand whether or not the discussions in these groups represented typical perspectives for their churches and in case there were any connections between the reading practices of these smaller groups and the larger congregational practices. For the most part, I found that the groups shared the theological perspectives of their larger communities, evident most notably in the difficulty expressed with Islam in the Dames and the Divine group and in a talk given on Islam for the church at large.⁹⁴ On the other hand, as one might expect, the interpretive and rhetorical practices involved in sermons at these churches did not take similar forms as the reading practices in smaller groups.

In each church, I met first with the pastor or leader in charge of the small group meetings to explain my project and to ask permission to visit the individual group meetings

⁹³ The names of these churches are pseudonyms.

⁹⁴ See chapter four.

and ask permission from the groups themselves. In the case of the liberal Protestant church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, and the African American church, Quinn Temple, I was introduced to the pastor of the church through colleagues and securing the agreement of the groups themselves went smoothly. In the case of the evangelical Protestant church, Heights Neighborhood Church, my institutional connection provided a liability rather than an entrance since my institution is affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination, which would have been suspect for the majority of the congregants along with the discipline of religious studies in secular academia in general.⁹⁵ I was familiar with the church from personal connections and past involvement with the denomination, but ultimately chose not to mention those connections in my initial introductions to group leaders. I knew from my past involvement that these associations were not enough to make me an insider, especially since they were in the past.⁹⁶ As a result, the process of finding a group to join proceeded more slowly and I eventually was allowed to attend the group that the women's ministry leader was directly involved in (the Breathing Space Wednesday group). Obtaining an entry into the Breathing Space Thursday group took even more time because Monica, the leader of the Thursday group, was concerned about how big her group was. She agreed to record her group meetings for me, so I attended the large gathering before her group meeting only.

⁹⁵ See discussion in chapter four for the construction of the Protestant outsiders within the evangelical discourse of this church.

⁹⁶ In essence, I made the opposite choice from James Bielo when faced with the question of "Are you born-again?" and decided to let the specifics of my own Christian identity remain ambiguous. In my meeting with one of the ministry leaders at Heights Community Church, I was asked if I had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In my answer, I narrated some of the key moments of my religious life and ended with an articulation of some of the Christian concepts that are important to me. This answer seemed sufficient, even though I knew I had not performed a narrative that included a dramatic personal experience of God or the gate-keeping doctrines of evangelicalism. Bielo would have simply answered "Yes" to the question in some way and "risked dishonesty." It may be that I was not allowed as much access to these evangelical groups as a result of my choice not to perform the scripts as I knew they should be performed. See Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 36-37.

During her group meeting, I attended another Breathing Space small group, which eventually declined to be part of my study.

These differences in the openness with which the groups accepted me as a researcher are aligned with the groups' different orientations towards religious outsiders as I describe in chapter four, but they are also a function of my own location within the American religious landscape. To simplify an extremely complicated personal and familial religious history, I grew up in a multi-racial charismatic congregation, have been a member of both of the white denominations in this study, been one of a handful of white members of an African-American congregation (though not of the same denomination as Quinn Temple) and currently identify as Mennonite. So while I have personal experience that helped me in all of the church settings in this research, the last identification set me apart somewhat, since Anabaptists are rare in the South and most of the people in these groups had no prior personal experience with Mennonites. In the case of the Breathing Space groups, this did not necessarily allay any suspicions they might have had about me since it made my religious identity even more illegible to them. In the other groups, this identity was met more with curiosity than suspicion. My Mennonite identity, as primarily a mid-Atlantic and Midwestern religious identity, also marked the major cultural difference between me and the members of these groups in that I am from the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern part of the U.S. I noticed this difference the most with the Mysterion group, a group of young women in their 20s who were described to me by the pastor of their church as the most demographically similar to me. Many of these women had been members of sororities at Southern colleges and therefore had been shaped in cultural ways that I was not.⁹⁷ The "Southern-ness" of all

⁹⁷ I have not found any scholarly comparative studies, but I have known other women colleagues from the Northeast who have experienced differences in the gender performance of Southern women

of these groups was apparent to me because of my cultural position outside of it, even if I did not eventually find it significant for the analysis of their reading practices.

In all of the groups, my past experiences in these particular varieties of Protestantism and my personal Protestant identity enabled me to be judicious in my participation in the group discussions. Indeed, one might say that I acquired a “habitus” for religious reading groups throughout my own religious involvement.⁹⁸ The dynamics of these groups are built on the participation of all the attendees and work best when participants are open and vulnerable with each other. Indeed, facilitators can sometimes be very protective of the intimacy of the group when it has been hard won. Therefore, it was crucial for me to be seen as an equal participant in these groups, albeit one who happens to be a graduate student and who happens to be recording. Karen McCarthy Brown narrates an analogous situation in her ethnography of a Vodou priestess based in Brooklyn.⁹⁹ In the relationships that she developed and in the practice of Vodou, she found that she could not adequately study these practices without becoming an initiate in Vodou. The groups I visited have a higher tolerance for outsiders than the tradition that Brown studied; however it was still necessary for me to draw upon my own religious experiences and knowledge in the discussion so that my presence as an observer did not become a hindrance to the group dynamic. In this, I endeavored to find a balance between the roles of participant and observer. For example,

compared to their own performance, especially in the areas of wearing makeup daily. All of the women in this group wore makeup daily, even those who were full-time students.

⁹⁸ I am drawing the term “habitus” of course from Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Furthermore, as Orsi describes in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, the choice of scholarly subject often appears like a child’s curiosity about the religious world of adults when studying one’s own religious culture, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 158-161. Certainly, my own involvement in Protestant religious reading groups provided the “hunch” that there was something to there to study.

⁹⁹ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

sharing my prayer requests and relevant personal examples helped me to share in the intimacy of the group without disruption. Yet when the discussion turned to theological questions such as the meaning of the resurrection and the connection between mind and body, insights I might draw from my training in theology and in religious studies might be disruptive by redirecting or overtaking the discussion. In these cases, I tried to keep quiet and participate less, though in all of the groups (even in the evangelical Breathing Space group) my training was sometimes treated as an asset, and I was directly called upon to answer particular questions. I usually replied that I did not know the answer (and usually I did not know the answer) and tried to discourage this kind of questioning. In the excerpts of conversations throughout the dissertation, I have included my own participation in the conversation where it was relevant, and I trust that these excerpts will show that my participation in the discussions did not significantly change the discussions of these groups.

Moreover, I found that the need for reciprocity in terms of personal disclosure in group discussions was even more evident in the individual interviews I conducted. In an attempt to understand the role of their collective reading practices within their larger religious lives and to understand more deeply some of their theological perspectives, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 individual members of these groups (about half the total number of participants). I began each interview by asking the woman to tell me about her “faith journey,” essentially her religious life story, and followed up with questions about the particulars of her religious involvement and her thoughts about her particular group.¹⁰⁰ In many of the interviews, the women turned the tables and asked me questions

¹⁰⁰ The list of interview questions I used are included as an appendix to this dissertation. I used roughly the same questions in each interview, though the order of questions was considerably altered depending on whether or not the woman volunteered answers to particular questions in her opening narrative.

about my religious upbringing and experiences at the conclusion of the interview. I answered these questions candidly and honestly, considering that a reciprocal personal disclosure was only fair. Since I conducted these interviews at the end of my attendance in these groups, I had already built a rapport with most of these individuals and therefore my personal disclosures also could not have altered the dynamics of the group discussions up until that point. The relationships I built with these individual women also were significant in determining who agreed to the interviews and who did not. No one from the Breathing Space Thursday group that I did not personally attend agreed to an interview, though two individuals from the Thursday group that I attended while Monica was recording her group for me agreed to an interview.

Ultimately, these interviews did not play a large role in my analysis of the group reading practices, since the women in general were not particularly reflective on the role of the reading practices in their lives or their effects.¹⁰¹ This fact highlights the importance of participant observation in the analysis of these reading practices and the almost indispensability of working from audio recordings to create close transcriptions of these groups' discussions. What happens in these group meetings is a discursive practice that people *do*, but do not necessarily reflect upon in the process of doing and is relatively ephemeral.¹⁰² Furthermore, while there were a few instances in which the presence of the

¹⁰¹ These interviews could be analyzed on their own terms as a body of data, but I have not undertaken that extensive analysis for this dissertation.

¹⁰² I am not intending a dichotomy between thought and action here or that the women were incapable of reflecting on their practice. Rather it was hard to generally reflect on the practices of reading removed from the setting and I might have gotten more detailed reflections on the practice I had asked questions about a specific group meeting immediately following the meeting. I describe a moment of self-consciousness about the irreverence of the discussion in chapter three, and I could have analyzed these infrequent moments of self-consciousness and "meta-pragmatic" discourse throughout, but did not. See Laurie Patton, "The Enjoyment of Cows: Self-Consciousness and Ritual Action in the Early Indian Grhya Sutras" *History of Religions*, 51, no. 4 (2012): 364-381, for a

recorder made someone self-conscious and an individual called attention to the fact that I was recording, for the most part everyone quickly forgot that I was recording the discussions. I am convinced that taking notes (especially if no one else was taking notes) and not participating in the discussions would have made the women in these groups more self-conscious since my own body posture would have made them feel observed. Finally, recording the discussion portion of these meetings allowed me to participate more naturally within the discussions, to focus on non-verbal details in my fieldnotes, and to conserve the energy needed to keep up the marathon of group meetings I attended each week.

The balance between participation and observation that I attempted to maintain in this dissertation is reminiscent of what Lila Abu-Lughod describes as halfie ethnography.¹⁰³ In her work, the term halfie refers to the way that women across cultures both share and do not share experiences, as well as her own experience of being accepted by Bedouin women in part because of her Palestinian heritage. In my own research, being a halfie might refer to the way that, although I am not currently a participant in any of the varieties of Protestantism I have selected, I have participated in all of these forms of Protestantism in the past. These Protestant traditions are part of the situatedness of my subjectivity and the experiences that have formed my perspectives on religion. This connection to my object of research is not unique to my experience, since many scholars of religion have religious pasts and presents, even if they are not always as plural as mine. Robert Orsi, in *Between Heaven and Earth*, highlights the way that his own Catholic upbringing affects his work, but he also notes how

definition of “meta-pragmatic” discourse and an analysis of ritual self-consciousness drawn from Michael Silverstein, “The Limits of Awareness” in *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*, ed. A. Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001) and the work of Catherine Bell.

¹⁰³ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?” *Women and Performance*, 5, no. 1 (1999): 7-27. Also see Deepak Sarma, “Let the *Apta* (Trustworthy) Hindu Speak!” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2000): 781-790, for a discussion of the idea of hybridity in a reflection on being both an insider and outsider in her study of Hindusim.

scholarly training in religion is a formation that distances us from our religious pasts and makes it difficult for us to identify with the subjects of our research.¹⁰⁴ In many of the groups I attended, the distance between my current perspectives and those of the participants was quite palpable to me. Nonetheless in the ethnography that follows, I have attempted to represent the perspectives and practices of these groups as faithfully as I can, even if my religious studies perspective and some of my criticisms would not be shared by the women in these groups.

Although my interactions with the women in these groups, both in the discussions and in the interviews, contained a high degree of personal reciprocity, I have not shared my conclusions that I have articulated in this dissertation with the women in each of these groups. In other words, this is not a reciprocal ethnography in which I solicited feedback on my conclusions from these groups of women.¹⁰⁵ I did facilitate a focus group discussion for the Dames and the Divine group at the suggestion of a few of the women after my interviews with them. This discussion centered on the strengths and weaknesses of the group and the group concluded that although they have become a highly unstructured group and they could do more to include those who speak up less, they were unwilling to make any changes in how the group conducts itself.¹⁰⁶ This discussion did not focus in depth on the particular

¹⁰⁴ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 146-176.

¹⁰⁵ See Elaine J. Lawless, "‘I Was Afraid Someone Like You...an Outsider... Would Misunderstand’: Negotiating Interpretive Differences between Ethnographers and Subjects," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 105, no. 417 (1992): 302-314, for a description of how and why she developed a reciprocal ethnographic method. She describes what she did not do in *Handmaidens of the Lord* and how she shifted her method to incorporate dialogue with her informants in *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness Through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). My study fits more with her method in *Handmaidens of the Lord*, especially in my desire to continue dialogue with my informants but not necessarily including their thoughts in the work.

¹⁰⁶ Dames and the Divine meetings, June 2, 2010; June 9, 2010.

interpretive practices of the group and I did not turn the discussion in that direction. I could have incorporated more specific questions about reading practices or asked for reflections on my conclusions in the interviews I conducted, but I chose to keep all of my questions more open ended.¹⁰⁷ I intend to share a summary of my research findings with each of the groups that participated in this study, especially since many of the leaders expected that my research would be done “for the good of the church.”¹⁰⁸ Even though in some cases it will be difficult to do so since some of the groups have disbanded or were temporary in nature to begin with, I will do my best to provide an opportunity to share these findings with the group participants before I move away from the area. I consider this act of transparency as my obligation to honor the trust that the women in all of these groups placed in me by sharing their lives and religious practices with me.

The Shape of the Chapters to Come

The ethnographic material I collected among these five groups of women presented me with several options when I considered the organization of my analysis. The obvious and perhaps traditionally ethnographic way to structure my conclusions would have been to write a chapter about each group of women in which their respective settings, cultures, and

¹⁰⁷ The exception to this might be the question “What does being a Christian mean to you?” that I began asking in a handful of my later interviews. The answers to this question could have been aggregated and included in chapter four in the discussion of the boundary between religious insiders and outsiders. Yet since I did not ask this question to all of the women, I have left the few answers I have out of my analysis in that chapter.

¹⁰⁸ Monica, the Breathing Space Thursday group leader, expressed her willingness to record her group’s meetings for me because it was for the good of the church. I did my best to explain my research goals, received oral or written consent from all of the women in these groups, and made clear that my long-term career goals involved teaching in “secular” academia and not in a seminary. Nonetheless, since most of the women in these groups, both leaders and participants, had little understanding of the academic discipline of religious studies and because I identified myself as a Christian, it is likely that many of the women thought I was doing a theological project.

practices could have been described. Considering the impracticalities of writing what would essentially be an ethnography of each group and considering my hope to emphasize the ways in which practices of reading were shared across the theological and demographic differences between these groups, a different strategy was necessary to address all of the themes I wanted to lift out of this material. Nonetheless, writing about every group in each chapter would also make each chapter prohibitively long. Therefore, only the first and fourth chapters contain material that is drawn from all of the five groups I attended and in both of these chapters I contracted my analysis of the two Breathing Space groups largely into one, since as I mentioned above, I did not have as much direct observational data from the Breathing Space Thursday group. In chapters two and three, I allowed the genre of texts under discussion to determine which groups I discussed and so I only address the practices of three of the groups (Breathing Space Wednesday, Dames and the Divine, Quinn Temple) in chapter two and two of the groups (Mysterion and Breathing Space Thursday) in chapter three.

The division between the framing chapters and the two chapters in the middle also roughly corresponds with a difference in thematic emphasis. The first and last chapters examine the intersubjective dimensions of these groups' discussions, with the first chapter focusing on the immediate others in the room for the discussion and the last chapter addressing discourses about religious others whom the women in these groups may never meet. On the other hand, the middle chapters, two and three, analyze the relationships between the women and the texts under discussion, a relationship that can only be called intersubjective metaphorically. Since these chapters discuss what the women in these groups do with the religious texts under discussion, these are also the chapters that delve the most deeply into the difficulties of describing the kinds of "agency" that these women display.

Nevertheless, this is indeed a difference of emphasis and not a stark division, since the question of how intersubjectivity is related to the exercise of agency runs throughout the dissertation. Moreover, all of the chapters deal with these women's relationships with individuals and traditions that might be described as external to themselves, even if by varying degrees and from varying positionalities, and so they represent different kinds of relationships between the self and an other.

In the end, the process of reading is unevenly present in the chapters that follow, largely because of my shift from formal practice of reading to the thematic content of the discussions in chapter four. Although chapter one does not feature a genre of text, but rather a genre of interpretation that involves the examples from life stories that are told in the context of the group, this fact is somewhat of an accident of ethnographic fieldwork. The genre of spiritual autobiography or spiritual memoir is extremely popular and groups I attended had included such books in their reading selections, just not that frequently during the year I was doing fieldwork. Since it often takes several months for a group to finish a book together and therefore I could only observe a few of the reading selections in each group, this omission is not necessarily indicative of an omission in Protestant women's collective reading practices in general. It is, however, important that the interpretive practice I describe in that first chapter has legs that allow it crossover between the interpretation of individual's lives in both oral and textual forms. In the final chapter, the texts that the women were reading together are present in the discussions I excerpt, but a genre of texts does not take the pride of place in my analysis. This displacement is because the practice of reading or the relationship between the texts and the readers in this chapter is most properly described as associational in which the texts are used as a jumping off point for further

discussion. This type of reading engages the content of the texts and connects it to larger discourses and topics of importance for the group. Therefore, I am choosing to focus on *what* the women talked about and to leave some of the features of *how* the women talked about them in the background. Associational reading foregrounds whatever topics are relevant for that particular group and this means that some of the differences between the varieties of American Protestantism in which these groups are situated are drawn in starker relief in this chapter. I could have selected other topics that were brought up in discussion in order to compare and contrast the perspectives of these groups, but the topic of the relationship with religious others is at the center of my exploration of intersubjectivity in this dissertation.

Having delineated the broad contours of the themes throughout the chapters, I now turn to a description of each of the chapters in their particulars. The first chapter describes the interpretive practice of resonating with the life stories of other women, or more particularly with the snippets of examples that women share in the course of discussion. I describe the general format of the group meetings as including a gathering time, a time for discussion, and closing or prayer time. These practices around the practice of reading itself are intended to help create the intimacy that allows individuals to share details of their personal lives with the others in the groups. I argue that the hearing of these details can occasion an interpretive practice in which the hearer interprets her own life story in ways that resonate with the details that they have heard. I draw upon Wilhem Dilthey's account of how meaningful connections are perceived between a part and a whole to explain how sharing a detail of one's life in the context of discussion can create resonances with one's sense of the whole of one's life and with the life stories of others. These resonances are not the

imposition of one life story on top of another or the appropriation of stories as if they were one's own. Rather, these resonances are a kind of intersubjectivity in which individuals' stories intermingle and are influenced by coming into contact with each other, but not in such a way that the individual melodies are lost. In other words, this kind of interpretation demonstrates how women co-construct their personal narratives with contributions from others who are also narrating their personal narratives.

In chapter two, I turn to the discussions of the texts themselves, and in particular, the discussions of theological or doctrinal genres of texts. In the Quinn Temple, Dames and the Divine, and Breathing Space Wednesday groups, these texts included theological texts published for a popular audience (*The Will of God* by Leslie Weatherhead and *God is the Gospel* by John Piper), topically arranged Bible study materials (a video series called *Believing God* by Beth Moore), and doctrinal elements of the Bible (the book of Romans or isolated verses in the Bible selected for *lectio divina*).¹⁰⁹ I describe the reading practice that surrounded these kinds of texts as a complex combination of “wallowing in” and “struggling with” these doctrinal texts. Wallowing represents the idealized form of religious reading in which the perspectives of the text are intended to be internalized by the reader completely. The reader is expected to be transformed by her repetitive reading of the text. All of the groups in this chapter held this kind of relationship with the text as important and desirable. Nonetheless, I also witnessed that the women in these groups struggled to realize the kinds of complete merging of their perspectives and the perspectives of the texts. I argue that the practice of struggling with a text entails a disposition to internalize the text, as well as the recognition of competing realities and perspectives that might contradict the text. The

¹⁰⁹ *Lectio divina* is a prayerful, repetitive reading practice adapted from medieval monastic reading practices. Norvene West, *No Moment Too Small: Rhythms of Silence, Prayer, and Holy Reading*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 153 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994).

uneven result of this modality of openness reflects the reality that the women in these groups are multiply situated in several perspectival horizons and, that as Linda Martín Alcoff argues, a pluritopic hermeneutics is necessary to describe the multiplicity of social identities that shape the subject. These multiple perspectival horizons co-construct the religious perspectives of the individual women in these groups, both through support and resistance. Nonetheless, the multiplicity of agents contributing to the outcomes of this practice point to the underlying plurality of all social action, which ultimately divests agents of the ability to control the effects of their actions.¹¹⁰ While all these “agents” in this practice—the texts, the group leaders, the tradition, the women themselves and all of the ways their experiences are shaped by outside influences—contribute to the outcome, none of them can singularly be given responsibility for any particular effect of these religious reading practices.

Chapter three delves into another genre of texts that featured prominently in the discussions of the groups I attended. The *Mysterion* group and the Breathing Space Thursday group both read books of the Bible that contain significant portions of narrative (the gospels Mark and John, and Exodus, respectively). In these discussions, the two groups imagined themselves in the world of the text and specifically as the characters in the text. The similarities between these two groups’ reading practices were striking, despite the significant differences between the groups’ understandings of the authority of the Bible and between their general theological orientations. I argue that the practice of imagining oneself as a character in the text is a better way to describe this practice of reading than the term “identification” often used by readers and analysts of reading alike. Imagining oneself in the text is more akin to the “imaginative variations of the ego” that Paul Ricoeur describes in the process of entering the world of the text for both the author and the reader. Ultimately, this

¹¹⁰ I will engage Linda Zerilli’s reading Hannah Arendt to elaborate this point.

practice of imagining oneself in text describes the playful aspect of these women's religious reading, which is often missed in accounts of women's religious reading. Furthermore, the category of "play" is also unaccounted for in schema of agency that are concerned with the effects of action, since playfulness is not "seriously" intended to have an effect. The modality of agency in imagining oneself as a character in a text operates in a realm outside of causes and effects and also has a move outside of the self into the "other" as its precondition.

Finally, in the last chapter, I turn to the topic of drawing boundaries between religious insiders and religious outsiders, in the manner that the groups themselves discussed these boundaries. The groups I attended defined themselves within different sectors of American Protestantism, therefore their definitions of insiders and outsiders were accordingly different. For instance, the white evangelical women in the Breathing Space group drew a strict boundary between believers who have had a conversion experience and those outsiders (including other Christians) who engage in "legalism" to try to get to God. The white liberal Protestant women in the Dames and the Divine and Mysterion groups distance themselves from Christians who draw such strict boundaries between insiders and outsiders and in contrast, hold inclusivity as the primary ideal in their own definitions of Christianity. Furthermore, the African-American women members of the Quinn Temple group define their Christianity pragmatically in which the boundary between insiders and outsiders is somewhat fluid, since anyone could be a help or a hindrance to the personal and social change that they seek. Among these groups, those that defined religious insiders as those who had interior experiences of faith and religious outsiders as those who have culturally or socially-derived religious identities (the Dames and the Divine and the Breathing Space groups) were the most likely to consider religious outsiders a threat to themselves. In other words, these

groups both participate in the secular-liberal definition of the autonomous subject even as their religious commitments place them outside of the category of secular. Moreover, the Dames and the Divine group self-identifies as feminist and shares the difficulties with Islam that have been identified in feminist thought by Wendy Brown and Saba Mahmood.¹¹¹ I argue that this shared interiorized model of the subject is part of the unmarked Protestantism in which feminist thought also participates when it assumes that religious identity can be ignored as an interior concern. In their alternative style of engaging religious others, the Quinn Temple group did not assume that the social foundations of religious identity were inauthentically religious and therefore the Quinn Temple group provides a possible model of engagement with religious others that does not require demonstrations of individual autonomy as necessary for “good” forms of religious identity.

In the conclusion, I use the image of a “zero-sum game” to explain how the models of agency that assume that the results of action must be divided up between the self and the other are too simplistic to describe the types of co-agency and the style of engagement with the other evident in Protestant women’s reading groups. In this final reflection, I venture that the failure of feminist scholarship to fit women’s religious agency into the logic of cause and effect has contributed to the continual return to the problem of describing women’s religious experience in that scholarship. I also return to Mark Hobart’s account of “complex agency” in the Balinese context in order to elaborate possibilities for theoretical accounts of agency that are capacious enough to describe agency in which the self and the other co-construct outcomes and in which the effects of a individual action cannot necessarily be isolated.

¹¹¹ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Saba Mahmood, “Religion, Feminism and Empire: The New Ambassadors of Islamophobia,” in *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion*, Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

Hobart's explanation of how instruments and patients also contribute to "complex agency" provides a way for me to explore how the genres of texts that were read in these groups contributed to the outcomes of these religious reading practices. Just as inanimate objects like plants can shape their use in the Balinese context, the texts under discussion in these Protestant women's groups shaped their own use in religious reading. I offer what follows in this dissertation in order to elucidate some of the features of the agency and intersubjectivity that appear in Protestant women's reading groups and to foster new genres of feminist engagements with religious women's experience.

Chapter One: Resonating with the Stories of Others

During my interviews with women from each of the groups I attended, almost every time I asked what the women valued most about their group, the women answered with statements that lifted up some aspect of their relationships with the other women in the group. Very often these answers were given with little hesitation as if this were the most obvious answer in the world. In particular, the answers I received focused on knowing the other women in the group and hearing what the other women shared about their lives. Donna, who attends the Dames and the Divine group, told me that she valued that “you get to know the individuals in a different manner” than in other settings.¹¹² Brenda told me that Dames and the Divine were “a group of women who share at a level that probably only one set of my friends that I’ve had over the years share.”¹¹³ In some ways these answers are obvious, since the women could presumably read the books that they read together at home and so the value of the group could not be in only the books themselves but also in the women who physically showed up for the group each meeting. Nonetheless, these responses point to the fact that hearing and sharing personal examples and life stories is one of the practices at the center of reading together for these groups of American Protestant women.

In this chapter, I will explore how the life stories of others, whether they are shared in person or through the autobiographical genres like spiritual memoir, are used in the process of narrating one’s own life story. For instance, Kim, one of the women in the Dames and the Divine group had moved away to attend seminary, sent regular updates by email to the group

¹¹² Interview with Donna, April 27, 2010. All of the names of individuals within the dissertation are pseudonymous. The group names have been chosen to reflect the spirit of the groups’ own names for themselves, with the exception of “Mysterion” who gave me permission to use the name they had informally chosen for themselves already.

¹¹³ Interview with Brenda, April 20, 2010.

that included reflections on her life at seminary. The group often would refer to these emails in conversation and were so particularly impressed by one email that they decided to discuss it together as their reading selection for one meeting. In the email, Kim had described the unharvested field of soybean crops that she had encountered during her recent visit to a retreat center. As she reflected on the meaning of these fields for her life, she shared, “After a year of abundant harvest in my life, the unharvested fields nagged at me. What have I left unharvested in my life?”¹¹⁴ In response, Loretta thought about how harvesting unharvested fields might mean having the courage to be a novice again and exploring aspects of oneself that you have not explored before. Elise joked that time might be running out for some of the group, given their age. But Jerry responded to this idea with the example of her father and by extension an example in her own life.

Jerry: I was going to say I don't know about that time business. My dad's 85 and when I tell people what he's doing, the first thing they ask me is, “Oh where's he moving, to assisted living?” Couldn't be farther from the truth. This is a luxury apartment building...It's gorgeous. Someone said to me this weekend, “My gosh, what an inspiration!” He's downsizing because he has to, if the place were big enough he would take everything with him, so thank goodness it's not big enough (*laughs*). And what an inspiration. What I'm finding is that he and I are connecting on a level we never connected on before, because I'm the only one in his immediate family that's been through something like this: leaving a nest to go to a nest all alone, after my divorce, living alone. And every once in a while he'll say to me, “You know what it feels like, you can relate to this.” And I'll call him and try to harvest some emotions from him, to make sure he's in touch with how he's feeling and not just keeping it inside... So I was grateful that a) that Ashley inspired us with this and that we started focusing on this because this is the paragraph that really *resonated* with me too, not just harvesting our own, but its helping other people harvest and sharing and being life coaches to them through these kinds of things. It's very inspirational.¹¹⁵

Jerry shared this story about a particular moment in her father's life because she saw a symmetry between his new experiences and the exploration of new emotions and experiences

¹¹⁴ Read aloud at the Dames and the Divine meeting, January 13, 2010.

¹¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

that Kim seemed to be encouraging in her reflection. However, she also took the opportunity to interpret some of her own experiences of being on her own after her divorce in light of her father's experience and Kim's reflection on her experiences. The personal example Jerry shared displays how in listening to Kim's story, she heard her father's story as well as her own story at the same time.

I want to highlight Jerry's word "resonate" to describe the practice of interpreting the stories of others in relation to their own life stories, whether a consonance or dissonance is heard, and I will discuss in this chapter how the women in the groups I attended resonated with the life narratives they read and the personal examples that were shared by other women in the group. The informal and formal conversations in religious reading groups provide spaces for the emergence of points of intersection between the life stories of individuals. These points of intersection occur when something in life story, either narrated in a text under discussion or narrated through personal examples by discussion participant, triggers a sense of symmetry between a woman's own story and the story she is hearing. This sense of symmetry provides an opportunity to reflect on the similarities or differences between one's own life story and the story of another and an opportunity to narrate one's one life story in light of the symmetry or resonance with someone else's. While spiritual memoirs or autobiographies were a frequently read genre by many of the groups I attended and certainly provided opportunities to interpret one's life story in relationship to a printed narrative, the conversations around and outside of the text discussions opened up just as many if not more opportunities for the women in these groups to interact directly with each other's life narratives.

Therefore, this chapter demonstrates how the life stories of individual women intertwine, not necessarily through being actors in or sharing events in each other's narratives, but how the life stories women hear from one another co-construct their own interpretations and narrations of their own life stories. In other words, through the sharing of personal examples, the process of self-narration is an inextricably intersubjective process. This intersubjective relation cannot be easily mapped onto patterns of influence that would describe how women's subjectivities are shaped by the life stories of others. The anxiety in many feminist conceptions of the subject is that these external narratives are either internalized by women in ways that somehow erase their own narratives or that hearing the stories of others is really a process of projecting our own narratives onto the stories of others in ways that erase the uniqueness of these narratives. In scholarship on the role of the other in the formation of the self, the concept of recognition is often at the center of parsing the intersubjective process at the foundation of subjectivity. I am choosing the word resonance to describe this process rather than recognition in order to sidestep the ways that recognition is often deployed in political philosophy about multiculturalism and also to provide an alternative to the specter of domination that hovers around the word recognition given its philosophical roots in Hegel's master-slave dialectic.

The description of how the women in these groups found resonance between their own life stories and the life stories of others is the first of the ways I will examine how religious women interact with others "external" to the self through narratives. In the chapter three, I will look at how women interact with characters in biblical narratives in order to describe how these women imagined themselves in the positions of others in narratives that are perceived as less immediate. I will explain why identification, which is often used to

describe how readers relate to characters in a text, is inadequate to describe such imaginative practices. Yet in the context of listening to one another's life stories, the word identification also could be and often is used to describe the similarities that women might hear between their own lives and the life stories they hear. So I am also passing over the word identification in order to choose the word resonance in my analysis of sharing personal examples in these religious reading groups, but I will reserve my interactions with scholarly discussions of identification for chapter three.

While this relegation of my theoretical discussion of identification to the association with interpretations of biblical narratives is somewhat arbitrary, the term identification seems to belong to the realm of narratives from elsewhere rather than narratives that are told to me by an individual sitting next to me. The differences in the reading practices associated with spiritual memoirs or autobiography and those associated with the genre of biblical narratives might also correspond with the use of the first person over third person narration. The more intimate first person stories in this chapter, whether they are told in person or narrated from the pages of a published book, are more easily shared in an environment that fosters intimacy and so this chapter also describes the practices of intimacy in each of the groups I attended. The women in the groups I visited got to know each other or deepened their relationships with each other in small talk conversations or in discussions around prayer concerns. These discussions made it easier to share snippets of their experiences and life stories in conversations focused on reading and occasionally women would also share longer personal narratives in the course of the reading discussions. Both the snippets and the longer narratives provide possible points of contact between individuals' narratives and occasions for self-reflection for women in the group.

Therefore, I begin this chapter with a reflection on the cultivation of intimacy in the groups I visited by describing the main structure of most of the group meetings. By following how these meetings moved from gathering time to a reading practice and then to a closing time, we see how this structure provides spaces for interactions between women. In addition to situating the emphasis placed on intimacy in these groups within traditions of religious reading and small groups in the U.S., I analyze the interactions that emerge in these spaces as a unique window into the hermeneutic process where women interpret the personal examples they hear. In order to describe how the points of contact these women experience between life stories within conversation or in texts are incorporated into their own life narratives, I draw on Dilthey's thoughts on the interpretive relationships between parts and a whole. In particular, Dilthey's notes on how meaning in music is interpreted are useful in building my concept of resonance in which women hear and possibly internally narrate their own stories as they listen to examples from the stories of others. An ethnographic description of how women in the groups I attended shared of personal examples will explain why the interpretive process of "resonating" with someone else's narrative that I am describing is helpful for addressing the "problem" of religious women's agency.

Resonating with another's story describes the co-construction of religious identity by the self and the other. In the final section of this chapter, I return to theoretical discussions of the formation of the self in scenes of narration, particularly in relationship to the problems of recognition by the other. As Kelly Oliver argues, "we need a new model of subjectivity, a model that does not ground identity in hostility toward others, but, rather, one that opens onto the possibility of working-through hostilities."¹¹⁶ I argue that my account of resonance in

¹¹⁶ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), 11.

self-narration provides a way to describe the influence of the other in the formation of the subject as working alongside the self. Narrating one's life story through resonance demonstrate a style of engagement with the other that is not inherently based in struggle and therefore neither the self nor the other need be attributed as having the sole responsibility for the narrative identity that is created.

The Practices of Intimacy and Reading Together

All of the groups I attended bookended their reading-related discussions with a gathering time in the beginning of their meeting and, with the exception of the Dames and the Divine group, a time for prayer requests at the end. These practices, aside from providing ritual markers for the boundaries of the reading practice, provided spaces for women to get to know each other and to share details about their lives. These spaces for interaction differ from the central discussions of the group in that personal details were shared more casually and aimed less often at provoking reflection. Nonetheless, these details shared at the beginning or the end of the meeting contribute to the reflective process at the center of the meeting by giving women a larger picture within which to understand the other women in the group when they share personal narratives during formal discussion. At the very least, this kind of more informal sharing fostered familiarity and trust that helped to undergird the ease of personal sharing during more formal discussion time.

Gathering Time

Each of the groups I attended preserved a gathering time before the meeting officially started that gave latecomers time to arrive. The gathering time served an important function

of passing the time while the group waited for enough members to arrive in order to hold the meeting, though of course this critical number varied from group to group. This time was almost always marked by food, which often provided a topic for conversation when there was no other, in groups where the members knew each other well as well as in groups where the members had just met. In the Mysterion group, the conversation often flowed easily among the young women who were all roughly the same age, both discussing food and catching up, as the two women who had volunteered to bring snacks that day set up their food. Often the savory and sweet snacks had been picked up at a supermarket on the way to the 7pm meeting since all the women in this group worked during the day. Yet sometimes there would be homemade snacks and sharing of recipes among the wide-ranging topics of discussion. Invariably, someone would be late, having rushed from work or from the gym, and the gathering time could sometimes last up to an hour before someone suggested that it was time to begin more formal discussion.

Since the Quinn Temple group was usually only a handful of people, waiting for a quorum was the primary purpose of the gathering time. This small neighborhood church's offices are in a hallway behind the church sanctuary and the meeting was either held in the sanctuary or in a small meeting room in the hallway of offices. Therefore the gathering time often also consisted of talking with whomever had come by the church office to talk to the secretary or the pastor, though these visitors rarely stayed for the group meeting. Even though the group met at noon, the group rarely shared lunch together, but the pastor usually provided fruit or some small snack that we shared throughout the meeting. This time of socializing seemed significant to those members like Mrs. Lowe, who was retired and spent most of her time at home caring for her mother. Mrs. Lowe told me in her interview that she

especially valued getting to know the other women in the group.¹¹⁷ Almost all of the women in this group, including Mrs. Lowe, held leadership roles and were very active in this very small church, and so it is notable that Mrs. Lowe felt that this group in particular had helped her to get to know the other women. I gathered from her comment that there may be few other opportunities for the women in this church to interact informally.

For the Dames and the Divine group, the gathering time served mainly as a time for the members of the group to catch up, many of them close friends who have known each other for years. The Dames have been meeting for about ten years, during which time they have kept a 7am meeting time, set when more of their number were working during the day. Even though most of the women are now retired, the few women who still work appreciate this early meeting time. Each woman brings two dollars to pay for the breakfast of sausage biscuits, mini muffins, and fruit prepared by the church's cook. As others trickle in, the women chat in clusters around the table with their food, catching up for 15 to 20 minutes until the leader for the day calls the meeting to order.

The Breathing Space groups at the evangelical church, both in their Wednesday night and Thursday morning meetings, held a gathering time over food before the groups began and individual women signed up to bring refreshments at least once per semester. However, in addition to this informal time, Breathing Space also held a structured gathering activity as a large group before splitting off into smaller groups. This structured time provided a chance for leaders to make formal announcements about upcoming church events, like the women's retreat, special seminars or service opportunities. The rest of this gathering time cycled through other activities such as singing praise songs, having an extended time of prayer or playing icebreaker games. Occasionally the gathering time activity was a presentation by a

¹¹⁷ Interview with Mrs. Lowe, July 30, 2010.

missionary or leader of a local ministry. The most notable activity during this time for my discussion of intimacy was when individual women shared stories that they had prepared ahead of time that framed their lives in religious terms. The women's ministry leadership of the church called these talks "candid" in order to shift this genre of testimony away from telling one's conversion story to include stories that provide a kind of snapshot into the issues and circumstances with which one is currently dealing. These stories create a space for religious identities to be performed in powerful ways both for the women who tell the stories and for those who listen to them.¹¹⁸ Obviously, this practice allowed individual women to become intimately known to the larger group, but also provided a space for resonating with life stories just like personal examples shared in discussion or life stories that are read.¹¹⁹ Yet these narratives differed in that there was rarely a time for other women to respond to these stories as they were told, but women did refer to them in their discussions and sometimes would approach a woman later to discuss it. Like the other types of more informal interactions during gathering time, these stories provided details of individual women's lives that opened up possibilities for women to ascertain points of contact between their own stories and the stories they heard as well as fostered deeper relationships between the women.

In short, the gathering time is an important time for group members to have interactions with other women in the group in ways that they might not have otherwise.

¹¹⁸ For an analysis of the function of testimonies within a different variety of evangelical Protestantism, see Elaine Lawless, *God's Peculiar People: Women's Voices and Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988). Also see my discussion of how conversion narratives performed and reinforced group boundaries in the Breathing Space groups in Chapter 4.

¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, I did not have permission to record any of these "candid," otherwise they would have provided a strong complement to my analysis on personal narratives shared in context of a book discussion below.

Even in a smaller church, where everyone should be expected to know everyone else, small groups can foster interactions that might not otherwise happen. The gathering time is the primary place where such unscheduled interactions take place, which in turn provide some of the building blocks for a sense of community.

Closing with Prayer Requests and Prayer

In all the groups in my study but the Dames and the Divine, the sharing of personal prayer requests at the end of each meeting was a prominent practice that fostered social connection between the women. The groups employed a number of structures for sharing prayer requests, yet regardless of the format women shared details of their lives and experiences more directly with each other during this time than in any other part of the meeting. At a minimum, this direct sharing helps the women to be more comfortable with each other as they get to know each other and to be able to ask how a certain situation turned out during the gathering time the following week. In the Quinn Temple group, the pastor asked for prayer requests from the group and then typically would pray for all of the requests in one prayer. If the group was meeting in the sanctuary that day, we would also stand in a circle and hold hands as she prayed for us. The Breathing Space groups would usually break off into still smaller groups of two to three women to share requests with one another and then pray together, usually with each woman sharing a request and praying for another woman with extemporaneous prayers. As I mentioned above, these groups were strict about ending on time and therefore would sometimes run out of time before these groups had a chance to gather. In these cases, a leader would pray a more general prayer to close the meeting.

The Mysterion group was struggling to find the right format for the prayer time at the end of their meetings when I first joined the group. Their practice was for each woman to share their requests individually in turn going around the circle and their requests were written into a prayer notebook. The leader would then ask for a volunteer to pray for all of the requests in one prayer using the written list as a guide and then the requests would also be sent out to everyone in the group through email. This format was efficient at giving each woman a chance to share requests and also at allowing the group to finish in a timely manner. However, some of the young women in this group were timid about praying out loud and the group was slow to volunteer to pray for the list. Eventually, the leader suggested that the group try a format in which each woman prays aloud for the person next to her, passing the notebook around the circle for reference. The group ended up preferring this method of praying for one another and adopted it for the rest of the time I attended. As a result of these very structured method of sharing and praying for one another, the Mysterion group was very good about asking about how particular issues were going during the gathering time and sometimes sent updates on particular requests to the group over email.

The Dames and the Divine group departs from the structure of most of the groups I attended in that they did not set aside time at the end of their meeting to share prayer requests and to pray for one another. There might be a number of explanations for why the group does not set aside time for sharing prayer requests, but one significant reason is that a few women leave early every week in order to get to work. The Dames try to accommodate these women by finishing around 8:15am, but they are rarely successful and the meeting tends to peter out rather than end with an official closing. For about five minutes before the discussion starts, the Dames often share updates on the health of those who are not present

and the joys surrounding children and grandchildren. These updates are brief, more like announcements during worship, and it was initially difficult for me to understand why so many of the Dames had described the group as extremely supportive when individual concerns were not regularly discussed at length. However, over time, I began to understand how tightly knit the Dames were and that the group drew upon other social networks for its members. For example, a number of the women had worked together at a nearby Christian school before they retired and some of the women were part of another reading group that had been meeting for 20 years. The longevity of the Dames, having met for almost ten years, also nurtured a sense of commitment and safety. I eventually witnessed moments when a member of the group was having a hard time and the group rose to the occasion, putting aside the agenda for the day and allowing the story to be told and comforting words to be said.

While I did not have permission to record this part of the meeting in all of the groups, the types of requests in all of the groups ran the same gamut of requests for health, material and emotional support, and religious development. In all of these forms of sharing prayer requests, I saw that sharing personal requests strengthens the bonds between the women in these groups and provides opportunities for the women to express care for one another by asking about how an issue was unfolding. For example, in one of the groups, one of the women shared that she was a rape survivor when she was contemplating agreeing to an interview for a story about how universities deal with repeated offenders. Sharing this vulnerability allowed the other women in the group to be supportive as she went through the process of reliving her experiences of the trial of her rapist for the journalist. Intimacy leads to more intimacy when a difficult issue is shared and then is more easily shared again or allows another share something similarly difficult. In their requests, the women modeled to

each other what kinds of things to discuss in prayer to God and indicated to each other what levels of intimacy and trust could be expected in other aspects of the group's discussions.

Intimacy as a Religious Good in American Protestantisms

When one counts up the time spent on practices that build intimacy in these groups, like sharing personal narratives and prayer requests, the value of fostering relationships and developing intimacy for women's religious reading groups becomes clear. From this perspective, the practices of intimacy appear as at least as important as the reading or study practices that putatively are the primary reason for gathering. In this way, religious reading groups share the features of any other church-based small group gathered for spiritual development. In Robert Wuthnow's 1991 survey about small group participation in the U.S., 77 percent of church-based group members said they had "told stories about some experience in your life" and 73 percent had "compared your own experiences with stories told by other members of the group about themselves."¹²⁰ Wuthnow also notes how having a close friend who functions as a peer or confidant in these groups promotes spirituality.¹²¹ In their contribution to the collection of short ethnographies that accompanied Wuthnow's findings, Elfriede Wedam and R. Stephen Warner describe a charismatic small group in which "a context of intimacy is the necessary means to the spiritual experiences that group members seek."¹²² One member of this group, Matt, explained the importance of the courage to share intimate issues with the group. "The only person I want to encounter is God, and I feel like I

¹²⁰ Robert Wuthnow ed., *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 387.

¹²¹ Wuthnow, "I Come Away Stronger," 388. See also Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

¹²² Elfriede Wedam and R. Stephen Warner, "The Institutionalization of Charisma," in *"I Come Away Stronger,"* 167.

encountered God if you tell me about your life and your experience of God or absence of God in your life. I encounter both you and God.”¹²³

While no one in the groups I attended articulated their experiences of God as so closely connected with hearing the stories of others, the value of the practices that promote getting to know one another is attested in almost all of my interview data.¹²⁴ Even from women in groups that devoted less time to these practices, like the evangelical Wednesday night Breathing Space group, I heard that they highly prized the intimacy of the group. This group rarely had time to share prayer requests or discuss in small groups at the end of the meeting, since the group was strict about ending on time and endeavored to cram as much Bible study into their time as possible. So I was surprised when Breathing Space member Kristina told me that one of the things she valued about the group was the opportunity to get together with the other women.¹²⁵ Furthermore, one of the questions I asked in my interviews was whether or not the fact that the group was comprised of all women mattered. The majority of the answers to this question indicated that the women valued the single gender composition of the group because a mixed gender group would feel less intimate.¹²⁶

In the Mysterion and Dames and the Divine groups, the value of intimacy was further communicated to me in interviews and in discussions through the evaluation of my own participation in the groups. The Dames were constantly pressing me after the meetings to feel

¹²³ Wedam and Warner, “The Institutionalization of Charisma,” 168.

¹²⁴ Interview with Morgan, September 8, 2010. Morgan was even a little vexed because she wished that the meetings would not go so late (since she had to get up early), but the extended time of socializing before the discussion was so important to her that she did not want to shorten it.

¹²⁵ Interview with Kristina, June 16, 2010.

¹²⁶ For one example from Interview with Jerry, July 21, 2010: “I can't imagine being as comfortable, free and relaxed if there were men there. I say that – It's kind of like, for me – It's kind of childish. It's kind of like being with a bunch a sisters and moms and the whole demeanor changes if the brothers or the dads come in. I like that too, but it's different. So I can't imagine getting the same fix and feeling out of it if it were a mixed group.”

welcome to share and speak up during the meetings and it was clear to me from these overtures that hearing everyone's "different perspective" was very important to the group. Kathleen of the Dames group even told me in her interview with me that she did not trust me because of her perception that I would not share what I thought during group discussions.¹²⁷ Others, like Barbara, wanted to turn the tables during our interview and wanted to hear more about my own spiritual narrative. It was clear from these interactions that the exchange of personal narratives was of extreme value for the group and I was expected to pay my dues by sharing in order to compensate for my observation of this group.¹²⁸

In the Mysterion and Breathing Space groups, it was easier for me to share aspects of my life with the people in the group through the prayer request times as a way of building rapport and to limit my involvement in the more formal discussion time. Even so, Laura of Mysterion told me that she had been relieved when I participated in the group, sharing my thoughts and prayer requests, since she had thought that perhaps I would feel more like an observer.¹²⁹ In the conversation I will describe below in which we were discussing being self-conscious about expressing our faith in public settings, Laura made it clear that just sharing surface aspects of my life would not have been enough. Immediately after I added my personal example into the discussion, she commented, "I'm really glad that you didn't

¹²⁷ Interview with Kathleen, May 12, 2010. Indeed in the Dames and the Divine group I did hold back for a number of reasons. The primary reason was that in such a large group that met over only an hour, I did not want to take time away from anyone else. Also, the times that I was called upon specifically to share my opinion often cast me as an expert and I was anxious not to be seen as one.

¹²⁸ Karen McCarthy Brown's personal involvement with and eventual initiation in Vodou as part of her research has become emblematic of the need to give of oneself for certain research settings. See *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn: Updated and Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1991, 2001). Also for an interesting discussion on the role of self-disclosure in interviews around secrets see Anne M. Lovell, "When Things Get Personal: Secrecy, Intimacy, and the Production of Experience in Fieldwork," in Athena McLean and Annette Leibling eds. *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Blurred Borders between Ethnography and Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 56-80.

¹²⁹ Interview with Laura, July 26, 2010.

only talk about school and stuff, I was worried that you were only going to listen.”¹³⁰ Though her concern represents perhaps a natural uncomfortability at the thought of being observed, it does also point to the value of the group meetings as an intimate space that my presence as an observer might disrupt.

Furthermore, I am aware that the effects of conceptions of religion as a private endeavor may also be operating in this context and to consider the possibility that the need to preserve privacy and confidentiality in a circle of trust may flow from the idea that religion should not overstep the boundary between public and private identities. The tie between religion and privacy may explain the only instance where the Mysterion group felt that their discussion was too intimate and asked me to turn off the recorder. Lisa, who had joined the group about halfway through the time I attended, was relating the story of the birth of her first nephew and partly because Lisa was also expecting a child at that time, the conversation turned to childbirth. As the conversation got more and more detailed, some line of intimacy or propriety was crossed and the women became self-conscious. Nonetheless, they continued the conversation off tape, which indicates that this group was a place one could discuss such private things for these women. Since this group was relatively upper middle class, the sensitivity to the boundaries of privacy many intersect with class and some religious traditions would value the outward performance of personal religious narratives to a greater degree.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Mysterion meeting, July 13, 2010.

¹³¹ See especially Jody Shapiro Davie, *Women in the Presence: Constructing Community and Seeking Spirituality in Mainline Protestantism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 131-138, for a discussion of middle-class taboos about being too personal in a mainline Protestant setting. Contrast with the role of testimony in the Pentecostal service in Elaine Lawless, *God's Peculiar People*, 1988.

Nonetheless, it is notable that the concern with intimacy in the groups in my study showed no difference across religious traditions, suggesting that this is a more widespread feature of American Protestant women's religious reading groups.¹³² In *Words upon the Word*, James Bielo describes intimacy as one of the distinctive textual ideologies that governs evangelical Bible reading strategies.¹³³ He argues that cultivating intimacy between group members corresponds to evangelical theologies that value intimacy with God. The evangelical group leaders that I approached were singularly more concerned that my presence as a participant observer would disrupt the intimacy of their groups, supporting Bielo's thesis that intimacy is ideologically important to evangelicals.¹³⁴ However, the examples above from theologically liberal mainline groups like Dames and the Divine and Mysterion show this can be a supreme value in mainline groups well. In support of Bielo's thesis however, in liberal church-based groups, the ideological support for valuing intimacy may not derive from valuing intimacy with God in particular, but may derive from a commitment to a seeking-type of spirituality that values the uniqueness of each individual's

¹³² As I note in the introduction, I am hesitant to extrapolate my findings from the African-American group in my study to larger trends in African-American religion since this group was probably atypical in terms of size and possibly in format. Nonetheless, the concern with intimacy did not seem to have the same ideological thrust in the African-American group. However, the fact that the African-American group also performed all the practices of intimacy I describe below indicates that intimacy is not insignificant to their conceptions of what happens in small groups.

¹³³ James Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: an Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 73-93.

¹³⁴ Tanya, the women's ministries leader at the Breathing Space church, in particular communicated this concern to me in our first meeting. In addition, the Breathing Space group with which I had substantial conversations about participating in my study and who eventually declined cited concerns about intimacy as their reason for declining. Monica, the leader of the Breathing Space Exodus group, however, was more concerned that her group would get too big, which is indirectly a concern about larger groups of people being less intimate. The Mysterion women also shared this concern when they considered merging with the remnants of another group, though they did not articulate at the outset concern that my presence as a participant observer might threaten intimacy. On the other hand, the Dames and the Divine group was quite large (approximately 15 people regularly) and they seemed to think the more the merrier when it came to intimacy.

spiritual journey.¹³⁵ Yet this emphasis on a supportive environment for introspection with the aid of others on a similar but unique journey could be attributed to larger trends in American religion across theological traditions that show influence from therapeutic approaches in the larger culture.¹³⁶

All of the practices of gathering and sharing that I have narrated enact a space where women can feel free to narrate experiences from their personal religious lives in the process of discussion, but creating the conditions of possibility for sharing does not automatically produce sharing. Melanie, who was a member of a Breathing Space group that did not participate in my study, told me during an interview that she had been disappointed with the lack of intimacy in her group.¹³⁷ She had selected the group because the topic seemed like it would be a good fit for someone going through a challenging period in her life. Melanie had lost her mother in the previous year in a way that felt very sudden and she felt as if the other women in the group would be overwhelmed if she shared her struggles to cope with her loss. She felt that none of the other women seemed to have experienced a similar loss, though she acknowledged it was possible that the other women in the group were also holding back when it came to discussing difficult issues. Whether it was due to an incompatibility between concerns the women in this group or due to some other reason, the practices of intimacy failed to make Melanie feel comfortable enough to share her struggles in this group.

The fact that the rituals of intimacy do not reliably enact connections between women or sharing of religious experiences is a continually vexing point for Protestant religious professionals. The ubiquity of manuals written for clergy about how to run a small

¹³⁵ See Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America after the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

¹³⁶ See also Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 1994.

¹³⁷ Interview with Melanie, April 20, 2010.

group ministry attests to the importance of this question. At the mainline church where the Dames and the Divine and Mysterion groups met, two members of the staff approached me to encourage me to share my findings at the end of my research because they were anxious to hear what I would find about how to make their small groups “work” better. I met with one minister after I completed my participant observation and we discussed how the Mysterion group had been formed during a push to start small groups and the Mysterion group was the only one that lasted from that initiative. From this leader’s perspective, the fact that the young women in this group were at a similar point in their lives, all about the same age, single and without children when the group started meeting seemed to be instrumental in fostering a connection between them. Although a few have married since I joined, I was the first married woman to attend the group and the group itself wondered whether my joining would change the group’s dynamic. When it was proposed that this group of young women merge with the remnants of another group, the Mysterion women voiced concerns that the women in the other group, who had young children, would feel like the Mysterion group could not “relate” to the concerns of young mothers.¹³⁸ In their view, sharing similar concerns can help to promote intimacy in a group and a lack of the ability to “relate” could stymie attempts to build intimacy.

However, while most of the individual women in the groups in my study seemed to value intimacy, most did not discuss how to make their groups work better or be more intimate. The Dames and the Divine women have a sense of anything goes in the discussions in particular, almost like the way that charismatic worship wants to have a loose structure in order to let God move.¹³⁹ Some of the women in Dames that I interviewed discussed how to

¹³⁸ Mysterion meeting, March 9, 2010.

¹³⁹ For one example, see Lawless, *God’s Peculiar People*, 59-60.

include women who spoke less during the meetings, but most were reticent to change anything about their meetings, almost as if the connection between them was magical and tampering would ruin it. In most of the groups, the moments where longer personal narratives were shared were relatively infrequent but most participants were unconcerned to increase them even while they seemed to hold the relationships with the other women in the group as the group's primary value. The need to maintain a lack of structure as a ritual frame means that one cannot complain when the god does not show up and the instances of sharing that do happen at other times guard against reading the ritual as a failure. Since most groups strive for a certain kind of balance between the sharing and reading parts of their meetings, this discussion of the book fills the gaps on the days when personal experiences are less forthcoming. Nevertheless, the value of intimacy in religious reading groups continues to be prominent for both religious professionals and group members.

The Interpretation of Life Stories and Narrative Identity

While intimacy is clearly a concern for many types of American Protestant groups, it holds a particular importance for groups whose central practice is reading. Intimacy provides space for the sharing of personal examples, which become texts under interpretation alongside the personal narratives that are encountered in texts. Many scholars have noted the importance of finding connections between narrated lives and the religious lives of readers and it stands to reason that for these connections to be made visible, individuals must offer their personal narratives in the course of discussion. Yet, I submit that there has been considerable difficulty in describing the process of interpretation since much if not the majority of this interpretation process is not made visible to us. The speculations about how readers use and make interpretive connections have been guided by what publishers and

group leaders intend for readers to do with texts and by reader responses in letters and interviews. Some of these analyses categorize what religious readers do with life narratives as identification and imitation.¹⁴⁰ Others characterize these reading processes more broadly as application, in which the effects of the reading practice are more varied.¹⁴¹ As I will discuss in chapter 2, the ideology of reading in which religious texts must have an effect in the reader's life is a prominent feature of Protestant religious reading. I argue here, however, that what many of these analyses are trying to describe is the way that the interpretation of life stories is imbricated in the process of self-narration. Furthermore, the reason that intimacy is important in this process of interpretation is that the process of self-narration requires encounters with the details of lives of others.

In much of his work, Wilhelm Dilthey was concerned with a variety of levels of human interpretation and he moves from how individuals interpret their own experience into what he called "lived experience"¹⁴² or interpreted experience, how lived experience is

¹⁴⁰ See specifically Candy Gunther Brown's section on memoir in *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 88-95. Admittedly Brown basis her analysis here on what evangelical leaders saw as the usefulness of memoirs as models. See also Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 132-8. I discuss Neal's analysis of identification and inspiration in evangelical romance novels in Chapter 3.

¹⁴¹ See Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111-115; Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 214; Erin A. Smith, "'What Would Jesus Do?' The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace," *Book History* 10 (2007), 206-7. For Frykholm this grows out of an approach to reading the Bible she calls the life-application method, which Lofton compares to the reading practices in Oprah's Book Club and Smith compares to the sermons and novels of social gospel preachers like Charles Sheldon. J. Bradley Wigger also describes a method of interpretation that privileges application in "Gracious Words: A Presbyterian Bible Study" in Robert Wuthnow ed., *I Come Away Stronger*, 46-47. See also Erin A. Smith, "'Jesus My Pal': Reading and Religion in Middlebrow America" *Canadian Review of American Studies: Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 37, no. 2 (2007), 150, for a discussion on how Bruce Barton's readers read his work as "equipment for living."

¹⁴² This is the traditional translation of the word *Erlebnis* that Dilthey used to refer to experience once it has become meaningful to an individual through reflection in the moment, distinguished from the

translated into a work of art by the artist, how that lived experience is then perceived by the audience for a work of art or in artistic criticism, and ultimately how this apparatus for interpreting human experience is used to interpret human history and society. The process by which individual parts are incorporated into a meaningful whole could be seen as the core of interpretive practice that exists on all of these levels in Dilthey's work. He says that the musical work in particular as it is recorded or notated (as opposed to the singular performance of a musical work) "is an ideal explication of a process, of a musical or poetic nexus of lived experience" in which we observe "parts of a whole that develop and move forward in time."¹⁴³ The relationship between the parts and the whole is one of mutual conditioning because of the temporal dimension of the musical work. In the tonal system or nexus of tones of the musical work, "the tones proceed in such a way that earlier ones are conditioned by subsequent ones" and "an earlier part may condition those that follow" by creating a sense of expectation.¹⁴⁴

This account of meaningful musical relationships is crucial because it shows how we assimilate the part to the whole, interpreting the single instance in light of the pattern that we apprehend as a whole. The meaning of a tone or phrase can be changed by what comes after it and the meaning develops as the phrase develops. Yet the example of the musical work is useful because it shows how the 'whole' is something that develops over time, that is changed by the incorporation of the sequence of parts as they are expressed in throughout the work. In other words, the interpretive process is not simply one of incorporating details into

raw perceptual experience that might be described as more immediate or perhaps even un-interpreted. See "Glossary" in *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 370.

¹⁴³ Wilhelm Dilthey, "Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason," in *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 241.

¹⁴⁴ Dilthey, "Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason." 241.

a pattern but a process in which the pattern expands and is changed as new details are heard. The image of resonance helps to describe the mutual conditioning, or how the part and the whole are both activated in the listening process and are changed in relationship with each other but also retain their distinctiveness.

This sense of the whole as constantly changing is also especially appropriate when considering the interpretation of a life, since unless one is on one's deathbed,¹⁴⁵ the final phrases of the music have not yet had a chance to change the perception of the whole. The coherence of a life is always being interpreted from different standpoints and with constant alterations as new experiences are brought into view. In his *Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason*, Dilthey describes how autobiographical narratives display the interpretation of a life in a kind of provisional whole. In particular, Dilthey points to Augustine's Confessions to illustrate how the meaningfulness of the whole conditions the interpretation of individual parts and how a part can determine a sense of the whole. "His narrative has its goal in the event of his conversion, and every earlier occurrence is only a way station on the road to this goal in which the design of providence for this human being is filled... Thus the understanding of his life consists in relating its parts to the realization of an absolute value, an unconditional highest good."¹⁴⁶ Augustine's life presents this mutual conditioning of the parts and the whole in broad strokes, but Dilthey insists that "[e]ach life has its own sense. It consists in a meaning-context in which every remembered present possesses an intrinsic value, and yet, through the nexus of memory, it is also related to the

¹⁴⁵ See Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880*, 91-92 on the use of deathbed narratives to occasion reflection on one's own life.

¹⁴⁶ Dilthey, "Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason," 220.

sense of the whole.”¹⁴⁷ In light of Dilthey’s awareness of the mutual conditioning of the part and the whole in music, one might call the connectedness that each individual knows about his or own life a sense of resonance in which the details of a life activate a sense of a meaningful whole.

In this account of the interpretation of lives as an interaction between parts and the whole, the way that these individual parts come into view and condition the whole that is most significant for the discussions in the groups I attended. It is the work of memory that preserves significant details and lifts parts of one’s life “from the endless stream of forgotten events.”¹⁴⁸ When one hears the life stories of others and in particular the details that have been deemed significant for the coherence of another’s life, there is a potential for the details that one hears to provoke reflection on the details of one’s own life and to activate one’s own capacity to see the connectedness of that detail with the whole in one’s life. This is where I extend Dilthey’s understanding of the “resonance” of the parts in the whole and vice versa into the intersubjective narration of lives. There are possibly two levels of resonance and interpretation that are operative when life stories are shared. The first is when one hears someone lift up a detail as particularly significant in her life and there is a sense of familiarity in which one says to oneself, “that detail is significant for my life story as well.” Then the second level of resonance is when one contemplates how that detail is actually significant for one’s sense of the whole of one’s life.

Like the example that Jerry shared from her father’s and her own experience quoted above, the twofold experience of resonating with someone else’s narrative and the interpretive resonance that is operating in one’s sense of the whole of one’s own life can

¹⁴⁷ Dilthey, “Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason,” 221.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 222.

sometimes occasion comments by the women in the group. Yet the interpretative process I am describing does not require verbalization to be effective, only the encounter with other life narratives in textual or ideally shared in person. How the other women in the group are affected by hearing these examples is often invisible to us and it makes it difficult for us to know whether these women see their own narratives reflected and consonant in these narrations or rather see a dissonant departure. These personal examples appear somewhat infrequently, perhaps less than once during each meeting, yet given the great value that women gave to sharing and learning from one another in their individual interviews with me, the sharing of personal examples can be understood as one of the central practices of religious reading groups. The fact that they are relatively infrequent does not diminish their importance, but rather indicates the ephemeral quality of religious experiences that are centered on intersubjective connections forged through dialogue. While not always evidenced by a verbal interchange, this mirroring of interpretive processes is the elusive moment of intersubjectivity that the rituals of gathering hope to produce. Within these mirrored interpretive steps, we can discern how individual women's subjectivities become the objects of interaction along with and by way of the texts that are being discussed.

This account I am offering of the interpretive process of resonating with other's narrations of their lives is not necessarily religious, since any narration that aims to place significant details in a meaningful whole would potentially occasion a self-interpretation. Yet the narration of lives in a religious context might be presupposed to narrate in the direction of the religious meaningfulness of a whole of a life. In addition, this account of self-interpretation in contact with others' self-interpretations provides a framework within which to understand similar impulses in other practices of American Protestant religious

reading. For instance, Erin A. Smith argues that “The Religious Book Club” in the 1920s and 30s engaged in middlebrow practices of reading by providing “an opportunity for readers to engage affectively with characters, authors, and judges in ways that seemed intimate and personal.”¹⁴⁹ In introducing the biographic selections, like one on the life of Paul, the judges emphasized a sense of communion on offer with the books’ subjects. This suggests that the readers were less concerned with the thought of Paul and more with “hearing him as if he were a personal friend confiding his feelings to us.”¹⁵⁰ While we do not have access to how these readers received these selections, my account suggests why this intimacy in the practice of reading was religiously important.

Kathryn Lofton, in her chapter on Oprah’s Book Club in her book *Oprah: the Gospel of an Icon*, argues that Oprah Winfrey encourages similar rapprochement between lives in books and the lives of readers.¹⁵¹ In particular, the rapprochement with Winfrey’s own life as a reader that is offered to her viewers is supported by this kind of personalist reading of texts. “Throughout the book club conversations, Winfrey’s driving want is to create connection: between participants and authors, among the participants, and between herself and her viewing audience.”¹⁵² Lofton describes how the best book club members are those whose lives have clear analogical links to the plot of the novel and can articulate how their own identity is mirrored in or contradicted by their interpretations of the novel.¹⁵³ This process of self-interpretation in connection with texts and with the narrations of others fits

¹⁴⁹ Erin A. Smith, “The Religious Book Club: Print Culture, Consumerism, and the Spiritual Life of American Protestants between the Wars,” in *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, eds. Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 227.

¹⁵⁰ Erin A. Smith, “The Religious Book Club,” 227.

¹⁵¹ Kathryn Lofton, “Reading Religiously: The Reformations of Oprah’s Book Club” in *Oprah: the Gospel of an Icon*, 180-226.

¹⁵² Lofton, *Oprah: the Gospel of an Icon*, 212.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 213.

extremely well within the account of resonating with the stories of others. Lofton places Oprah's Book Club within the context of religious reading practices like the Religious Book Club or the Chautauqua circuit and the ethnographic descriptions that I will provide will further situate the kind of intimacy that Winfrey promotes within the realm of Protestant reading practice.

Finally, this account of the practices of resonating with the self-narration of others as a moment of intersubjective interpretation helps to explain and frame the cultivation of intimacy in religious reading groups as a central good. The practices of intimacy described above help to create an environment where women feel comfortable sharing the details of their lives. The lives of others must become available in as intimate details as possible in order for the details of someone else's life to become an impetus for my own self-narration. This account also explains why sharing and hearing the lives of others in the process of reading together is prized so highly by the women in these groups. Through the self-narrations of others, one receives the potentiality of experiencing the sense of the meaningfulness of one's own life.

Sharing Personal Examples and Narratives in the Process of Reading

During the discussions that I attended, the women shared personal examples in course of their conversations about the texts in a number of different ways. In gatherings that take more of a class format in which one woman teaches the lesson, the leader often uses personal anecdotes as examples of the concepts or principles under discussion. This was the case with Vicky's Breathing Space study of Romans and the Beth Moore video that the Quinn Temple group. For instance, Vicky told a story about her husband taking her son to shop for his first car and discovering a sports car within their budget that turned out to have no engine. Vicky

said that many people in church are like that sports car and have no engine if they do not have the Holy Spirit in their lives.¹⁵⁴ Beth Moore told a story about walking on her ranch with her husband and how he was able to reflexively kill a snake because he had been carrying his gun. Moore used this story as illustration of how the women in the audience could be “armed and dangerous” with their thorough knowledge of the Bible.¹⁵⁵ Since these examples are primarily aimed at grounding concepts in vivid real life scenarios and bringing humor into the lesson however, they may or may not prompt self-reflection and self-narration in the hearers. At least, the women who hear these anecdotes are not given an opportunity to respond with their own narratives, since these examples are not shared in a discussion format.

Discussion leaders can also share examples explicitly to prompt the participants to think about examples in their own lives and possibly to share those examples with the group. This, of course, does not always prompt verbal sharing of examples, but is more likely to elicit an internal self-narration. Morgan, when she was leading a discussion in the Mysterion group, shared a story about her own uncomfortability with her parents’ practice of praying before meals in restaurants in order to encourage others to share stories about the ways they might seek “man’s approval over God’s approval.”¹⁵⁶ Jamie, the pastor at Quinn Temple, did this regularly in ways that model how to make connections between the topics under discussion and one’s own life. In a discussion on Psalms, Mrs. Edmond asked the group what experiences might make someone desire a relationship with God. Jamie’s response brought up an example from her volunteer work at the school, which might resonate with the other women because they were involved in similar volunteer activities.

¹⁵⁴ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, April 21, 2010. I discuss this example further in Chapter 4 in the context of drawing boundaries between who is and is not really a Christian according to Vicky.

¹⁵⁵ Quinn Temple meeting, November 4, 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Mysterion meeting, July 13, 2010.

Jamie: I think my responsibility to God is to always let my light shine so that other people can see God through me. So then that strikes up a desire, so like I'm sitting the kindergarten class today and I'm not doing anything but filing papers, like 3 months worth of papers that look alike (*laughter*), but I'm not doing anything but filing papers... When I left the teacher said, "That was so helpful, you don't even know..." That wasn't necessarily about me, because she didn't know my name from Adam, or what it is that I do or anything like that, but what is it about somebody who will come in and volunteer and do something that benefits them not at all... We don't ever have to mention God's name, right? But in that instance when I'm sitting there reading geography with kids and I don't know what the heck they are talking about and my demeanor and my kindness in talking to them. Then all of a sudden they say there is something about her, about the way she talks that makes me want to think about what I'm doing different.¹⁵⁷

Jamie drew an example from her immediate experience earlier that day and placed it in the context of the discussion about how people develop a desire for God from the relationships around them. Furthermore, Jamie models finding religious meaning in this everyday experience that the other women might also experience in the ways that they give their time in the community. She is even careful to point out that the teacher's response to her was not because she is known in the community as a pastor and therefore the other women can "shine their light" just as much as she can. She narrates a detail in her own life in such way to find significance within the larger whole of her life as a Christian.

Jamie's example also points to how group leaders' and discussants' interest in "application" fosters the sharing of personal examples. In the Breathing Space group that was studying Exodus, the leader Monica seemed to have encouraged a pattern of reading in which the text is discussed and then there is a move to "application" in which the effect of the text on one's life was affirmed.¹⁵⁸ Monica asked the following question, which asked specifically for personal examples.

¹⁵⁷ Quinn Temple meeting, February 24, 2010.

¹⁵⁸ I gathered this from the way that Monica marked some of her questions as moving to application too early in the discussion. Again, this method of reading is mentioned in both J. Bradley Wigger,

“The question that comes to my mind is sort of an application question but not like what you want to do differently when you walk out the room, but if God is so sweet to give us these visible signs of his presence with us, can you think of a time you would be willing to share when you felt like, and again this is a feeling question, when you felt like God was letting you know, I am right there with you, and how did he do that for you, what was the thing that communicated that to you?¹⁵⁹

Two women responded with stories that resonated with each other. Andrea shared about how she had felt God telling her that he loved her son and was going to take care of him when a storyteller used her son as a stand-in for the lost sheep that was found by Jesus. Ellie then shared a story in which she was preparing for a women’s retreat and did not have enough people to help out with childcare. When she sent out a request for prayer and women from an hour away responded that they could come and help, she felt like God was telling her that he was going to take care of the women who came to the retreat. While Monica’s question directs the women to think about when they felt God’s presence in a general way, the two women’s framed the stories about God’s care for the people they were trying to care for and about whom they were worrying. Ellie’s story in particular could have been framed differently in terms of God answering prayer, but it seems that she found resonance with the detail of the relationship of care that Andrea shared as the significant part of her story. The question that Monica asked was perhaps less important in Ellie’s self-narration than what she heard in Andrea’s personal example.

The sharing of personal examples also happens in response to something in the discussion or the book itself, not only as a response to a prompt by the discussion leader. In these instances, the speakers often explain the connections that they see between the life narrated in the text and their own lives. These more explicated interpretive connections

“Gracious Words: A Presbyterian Bible Study,” 1994, and Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, 2004.

¹⁵⁹ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 11, 2010.

display how resonances are heard that do not necessarily entail sameness between the narrated life and the self-narration of the speaker. As one might expect, these kinds of personal examples were shared more often when a text included autobiographical elements. For example, Joan responded to how Krista Tippett narrated the influence of the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr on her life and how Walter Rauschenbusch's blending of evangelical faith and social justice was akin to the milieu in which she grew up.

Joan: Well, chapter 2 is basically a great deal of autobiography of her voyage and her travels from her more fundamentalist grandfather to where she is now that's extremely ecumenical. She believes that...Anyway, a lot of these names at the beginning Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch and stuff are ones that I...When I was in college I was involved in the Wesley Foundation and I went on trips and conferences and all these wonderful things with these kids. Then I got out on my own and as she said, I think she felt also at one point in her life not that she had a big argument with religion but that it was irrelevant and I went through that period in my life too. Then got into this wonderful church in San Francisco that was a Congregationalist church. The minister had been in Washington, DC and he was involved politically and a lot of his friends and congregants were members of Congress. He blew up my...insular kind of thinking. I came from a farm in Wisconsin, so when I came to the city and everything...I described it as I hadn't changed but it was because after the explosion a lot of the pieces kind of fell back into the same place...but everything was questioned. Walter Rauschenbusch was quoted all the time, and it was the Social Gospel.

In this example, Joan finds a resonance between the arc of her own journey with religion and Krista Tippett's that is anchored by Tippett's mention of Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch. This detail triggers for Joan an opportunity to tell a miniature version of her life story, which in most other details bears no similarity to the bulk of the story that Krista Tippett tells about being shaped by living in Germany towards the end of the Cold War. In particular, Tippett does not claim Rauschenbusch's thought as a direct influence on her journey, yet for Joan the influence of Rauschenbusch on her community was significant for her.

Christina, in the Mysterion group, also found resonance between her own experiences and the autobiographical text the group was reading, Anne Lamott's *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*.

Christina: I also think when she talks about her feelings about her mom's death, feeling relief after her mom's death...I've heard people who have lost parents say it's such a mixed feeling. In some situations, depending on the nature of the death, like if someone's been sick for a long time, there's this weird combination of feeling immense relief for that person that the pain is over but also being sadder than they could possibly have ever imagined being in that moment. And not really knowing how to feel, because they seem like they should be at opposite ends of the spectrum. But that idea of relief. When my mom was in town, I'll be honest and say that I would think to myself during the day, "Okay, only 2 more days until she goes." And when she left we both cried at airport, but there was this sense of relief and I didn't like that but that's really how I felt. That struck me.¹⁶⁰

Christina picked up on that feeling of relief at the departure of a parent that Anne Lamott talks about in her chapter about her mother's death, even though Christina's mother had not died. In essence, Christina is highlighting Lamott's narration of a difficult parental relationship and how one can both feel a sense of loss and relief at the same time. Both Joan and Christina highlighted specific details in the lives that they read and the significance that the authors gave to those details as an impetus to interpret the significance of those details for in their own lives.

Finally, extended times of sharing personal examples give us an even more nuanced illustration of how placing the details of narrated lives in juxtaposition with each other in conversation is an intricate interpretive practice of self-narration. In the discussion below, the stories that women in the Quinn Temple group tell about their lives resonate with each other in subtle ways. Jamie was leading a discussion based on the leader's guide before the group watched the Beth Moore video. In their responses to Jamie's invitation to share

¹⁶⁰ Mysterion meeting, September 22, 2009.

personal examples began more and more to revolve around a theme of fear and one's fear's not coming true or being comforted when one was afraid.¹⁶¹

Jamie: God still maintained his promises to them, right? So that's a very powerful thing, right? So I'm going to give everybody a chance, if you wanted to share testimony of God's mighty acts in your life. When you know god remembered you despite everything else going on, that God has remembered you and kept you. Despite anything you thought you had done or anything you realistically had done, that God still remembered you and kept you...

Denise: There's so many.

Jamie: Well, just one, we don't need the whole journey. (*laughter*)

Denise: We would be here for days.

Jamie: We don't need you to write your own Psalm 106. For homework you can write your own Psalm 106, how 'bout that? (*laughter*)

Denise: I'd still be writin'... For me it just would be now. It would just be constantly being reminded that it's okay, that everything I envisioned as God's promise to me, to be here to be in Atlanta, is going to happen. I'm not going to have to move in with you [Jamie] after all. And it's just going to be okay. No matter what I have ever done, it's always been okay.

Mrs. Sherrod: What I want to say, I always had thought about when I was young and I was out there doing things, you know. Some of the workers I used to work with we used to go to parties and have a good time and stuff like that. This particular time we was on our way to a party, and the car we was in had broke down. So that way we had to get out and walk so far, and we had to go across something like a bridge. But if you look down and get your mind off what you doing you going to fall, you in trouble. And I was so *scared*, I remember I was so scared. They kept telling me, "You can do it, all you have to do is just don't look down, don't look down." I went up and I did it and I just didn't look down. But I think about that, that God kept me, because if I had looked down, scared as I was, I think I would have fell, and I wouldn't have been here today! I think about that all the time, he really kept me. That really changed my life, that really changed me. God was trying to show me something too, I was the only one scared in fear, no one else was scared, so it was something he trying to tell me to get my life in order.

Mrs. Lowe: I look at the generation of today, when they have house parties and things. Now in my time we had house parties, it was always somebody that wasn't in your age range that would come to the party and just mess it up. Back then, you know, they carried the sawed off shotgun, they would walk with a peg leg and a shotgun down beside...

Jamie: (*chuckling*) They didn't always have a peg leg (*chuckling*)

Mrs. Lowe: ...I had to run home one time! That kinda made me not like a lot of house parties. I look back at now, at least they never did kill anybody, they would shoot up there. But now they go to house parties, they shoot at each other, they kill each other.

¹⁶¹ I discuss the discussion on fear that follows directly after this section of the conversation that I have excerpted here in Chapter 2 in the section titled *Struggling to Change and "Operating in who God calls us to be."*

- I was talking to one of my daughters one day, some of the same things that's going on now, we did it, but when an adult came around, we know to stop. That's the only thing different in this generation, they don't have respect no more...
- Jamie: I think we really just stopped teaching them respect. I don't think they just lost it on their own, I think we just stopped.
- Mrs. Lowe: And another time... I love football, I love sports, okay? Two things I used to love: dancing. Every Saturday I was on Auburn Avenue at the Ting, because I would dance, I would love to dance. Zella Mays, she was going to take me to New York, and my mom said no. So that's how come I'm not famous now (*raucous laughter*)... I thought I'd make you laugh!
- Denise: Missed your opportunity...
- Mrs. Lowe: Gladys Knight and all them..
- Jamie: You could've been a backup dancer!
- Mrs. Lowe: Girl, I could've been. I loved Alvin Ailey. I used to love interpretive dancing, that's when the girls were doing the dancing. I saw me all over...
- Jamie: You could dance. I know Mrs. Sherrod would dance with you (*laughing*)
- Mrs. Lowe: Anyway, it just brings back some things, you learn from. I like to be partying with people but I don't like a lot of people at a house party. Like to get together with 5 or 10 people, that's it. But if it got to be more, I don't like house parties.
- Jamie: Alright, so anybody else have a testimony about God's mighty act in your life and how we can remember God's kindness and mighty acts?
- Mrs. Edmond: Well all through my life, I'm kinda like you, God has brought me through a lot of stuff. But one of the most memorable things, about 6 years ago, life was good and I was just moving around, I was doing as well as you do. I was at a graduation reception and I got very ill and had this excruciating pain in my stomach. I couldn't imagine what was wrong. But anyway to make a long story short, by the time I got home, my husband had to come and rush me to hospital and I had an obstruction in my intestines. The doctor said that had I not come within the next 15 minutes, I might not have made it. But anyway I had to have surgery and for 13 days I was in the hospital with all of this intestinal stuff. But as a result, my intestines were so damaged, that had to wear an ileostomy, the bag. I was just so depressed and so down and thought that life was over. With my active life and the kinds of things I was doing, an ileostomy was just not going to work for me. So I was very, very, very depressed, more than you can imagine. And so I went to my surgeon who did the ileostomy and then I went to [a different hospital], and the [second] doctor said to repair the ileostomy, or to take it down is what they call it, to take it off, was too dangerous because the surgery was too close to some other organs. *But* the doctor that I had gone to first, that I had left to get a second opinion, one day I was at home depressed and the phone rang and it was he, the surgeon! Not the surgeon's secretary, but the surgeon. He said, "Ms. Edmond, I was just calling to check on you, you went for a second opinion, how are things going?" I just burst out crying and I told him everything the surgeons had said and how they said it was too dangerous to do anything about it. And he said, "I'm not afraid of that surgery. If you want, why don't you come in and we talk about it." So, my son and I went, and naturally, he told of all the dangers but it was just like the Lord had sent him. There was this countenance about him that was *so different*. It was an experience I will never forget.

And so he said, “If you’re not afraid of the surgery, I’m not afraid.” That just blew me away. So we decided to do it, and the surgery went perfectly, the ileostomy was taken down, I have not had another minute’s problem and that’s been 6 years ago. So the Lord just intervened for me. Because when my phone rang, it was a ring that was just so unlike, you know I get a lot of phone calls, but for some reason...but when I heard his voice, and then the rest of the story you’ve heard. But then I thought to myself, how much does the Lord have to do for you for you to trust him, trust him, trust him. Every time I have a problem, everything time I get into something now, I just think back on that. I say, “If the Lord brought me through that, the Lord can bring me through all of this other little stuff.” Been marvelous for me.

Mrs. Lowe: That’s how I stopped smoking, 30 some years ago. They put this lady in the room with me on a machine. I went out and shredded those cigarettes up and I said, “No more!” Like you say, some things just does come to you. It’s just amazing. I’ve been through a lot. I look back at my aunt that’s 105, that took me as a child at 2 months old out of the hospital. So you know he’s blessed me. I tell anybody, I know I have been well blessed, I’m not going to say I’m perfect, but I know who have been there for me.¹⁶²

Mrs. Edmond’s dramatic story about feeling that God intervened picks up on the theme of fear that the other women shared in their stories, but in her case it was not her own fear but the fear of her doctor who refused to do the surgery that was answered by God. Her surgeon who proclaimed himself as unafraid is sent by the Lord in her story and encourages her not to be afraid either. Denise’s story refers to her recent move to Atlanta to be with her fiancé and her struggles to find a job and she feels remembered by God when she is reminded not to worry about what is going to happen next. In Mrs. Sherrod’s story, God intervened in her life both by making her afraid in order to “tell me something” and by keeping her safe. Finally, Mrs. Sherrod’s story helps Mrs. Lowe to reminisce about a similar partying lifestyle when she was younger, but it is not until the end that Mrs. Lowe articulates a sense of being remembered by God in the care that she received growing up. Besides Mrs. Lowe’s reminiscing, the details of the stories shared are largely completely divergent from one another. Nonetheless, there is a consonance between these stories beyond the sense of being remembered by God that was in Jamie’s initial invitation for testimonies.

¹⁶² Quinn Temple meeting, November 18, 2009.

It is unlikely that the women would have shared these stories in the same way or even the same stories had they not heard the other women's stories at the same time. Furthermore, with the exception of Denise's reflection on her present circumstances, the women are interpreting specific events in their lives in light of the "whole" they can perceive from their present perspective. In one sense, one could also see Denise's confidence in the present as an anticipation of the "whole" perspective that she will have when this time in her life is over. Like Augustine's in autobiography in which the event of his conversion is the part that conditions the interpretation of the whole of his life in light of God's providence, these women think of an experience with God that can anchor their interpretations of the details and the larger picture of their lives. They do this interpretive practice at Jamie's prompting, but also in the context of the narrations of the other women in the group. They hear the resonances between their own stories and the stories that are shared as they consider how to narrate their own life stories in the midst of the conversation. The contact between narratives through these resonances in events or parts can act as a catalyst for an interpretation of and perhaps a re-envisioning of the whole life narrative. These tellings and re-tellings of one's life story are not always articulated to others, nonetheless the moments of sharing personal examples in the course of a reading discussion can make some of the interactions between life stories visible to us.

Listening for Resonance instead of Recognition in Life Stories

Recently, a number of feminist theorists have taken up the emergence of subjectivity in scenes of address. These theorists, for instance Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and Adriana Cavarero in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, embrace the social conditions for the

emergence of the self and want to probe the ethical implications that can be gleaned from analyzing the relationship between self and other in scenes of address. For Oliver, as I mentioned in the introduction, the model of witnessing encourages a “response-ability” that acknowledges the “address-ability” of the subject and moves away from the agonistic struggle for recognition from the other. In Butler’s version, the ethical component derives from the fact that no one can be fully accountable for one’s own life story because of the irrecoverability one’s origins and because norms of language effect a “dispossession in language.”¹⁶³ Acknowledging this instability should lead to an ethical imperative for us to acknowledge the instability of the self-narration of others for Butler. Though in my opinion Oliver embraces the role of the other in the formation of the self in more positive terms, both Butler and Oliver see an other as fundamental to the formation of the self.

In Adriana Cavarero’s treatment of the formation of the self in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*, the narrative dimensions of identity are of central importance, since the scenes of address that she imagines include the “reciprocal narrative exchange” in friendships.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, the intersection between the self and the other in her account is similar to the interactions I have recounted above in the sharing of personal narratives in these reading groups. In Cavarero’s account the desire for the narration of our own life stories is satisfied by being known enough by another for that other to tell us the story of our lives. From this perspective, “I tell you my story in order to make you tell it to me” and whether or not the story is articulated back to me is not important.¹⁶⁵ Drawing on accounts of Italian feminist consciousness-raising groups, Cavarero tells the story of Emilia who was

¹⁶³ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 39.

¹⁶⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: New York: Routledge, 2000), 58.

¹⁶⁵ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 62.

constantly telling her story to her friend Amalia but was not gifted enough in writing to write it up herself. Amalia, who was a gifted writer, wrote Emilia's story for her because by this point she knew it by heart. After receiving the story of her life, Emilia "always carried it in her handbag and read it again and again, overcome by emotion."¹⁶⁶ According to Cavarero then, female friendships involve a reciprocal narration that features autobiographical exercises that we tell each other so that our story can be told back to us. Cavarero stresses that the actual hearing of one's own story from a friend is not necessary but it is the potentiality of hearing the story that a friend now knows by heart that is important.

This desire to be known by another could very well be one of the motivations for sharing personal examples in a reading group discussion. In particular, the practices of intimacy in which religious reading groups engage work toward an environment in which everyone knows each other well enough that they could tell each other's life stories. Certainly knowing others in the group well, which these women prized highly in their answers during interviews, is accompanied by being well known by others in the group in the cultivation of intimacy. One could argue that the potentiality for being known and for having others be able to tell your tale is the animating force behind the value of intimacy in these groups. However, given that the fact the practice of telling the stories back to the original narrators is absent in the juxtaposition of personal examples in the excerpts above, I am arguing that the practice of sharing personal examples in the discussion of texts seems to point to a different dynamic between self and other in the scene of narration.¹⁶⁷ The

¹⁶⁶ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55.

¹⁶⁷ The one example I observed that might fall into the category of narrating the heard story back to the teller is described in chapter two when Deborah offers of a meaning or gloss to Betty's story of finding her way after a divorce. Deborah affirms the value of the Betty's personal example for the discussion and at the same time validates a small part of the message of the book under discussion,

examples I have included above pose the question of why those who hear life stories are prompted to tell their *own* life stories in response to the stories they hear. I propose that when we listen to the life stories of others, we hear these stories, but we may also hear versions of our own stories alongside the stories of others. This interpretation of the dynamic of reciprocal narration that I am offering here explains the impulse to narrate one's own personal example in response to the personal narratives one hears.

The process of reading life narratives or spiritual memoirs, which is a prominent practice in the groups I attended, helps to isolate the impulse to narrate one's one life in response to hearing another's. Reading a life story is not a scene of reciprocal narration, in the sense that the reader cannot be known by the author and cannot hear her story told back to her by the author nor vice versa. Cavarero argues that the popularity of biographies over philosophical essays or even mysteries derives from "a sort of spontaneous reflex of the narratable self's desire for narration."¹⁶⁸ In other words, in her view, because we desire to hear our own stories told by others, we are automatically drawn to the narration of life stories of any kind. Yet as we saw above in Joan's response to the bits of autobiography in Krista Tippett's *Speaking of Faith*, the impulse that we see voiced in Joan's example is to narrate her own life story in response. Especially since Joan was leading the discussion that day, her reflection on her own life story was almost definitely part of her initial response when reading the book alone. Of course, one can see the second impulse to share her story with the others in the group deriving from the desire to be known, but sharing the example itself would not have been possible without Joan's initial reflection on her life in comparison to Krista Tippett's as it is narrated in her book. Therefore, from the perspective of my

Dames and the Divine meeting, September 16, 2009. Yet overwhelmingly, the responses to personal examples were not to tell the examples back but rather to offer one's own story in response.

¹⁶⁸ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 70, 74.

experiences with these reading groups, the desire to tell one's story to *oneself* in an interpretive relationship to the stories of others is a fundamental driver in the sharing of personal examples. The valences of storytelling in the context of religious reading groups seems to privilege hearing life stories for the help they give in interpreting and constructing our own narratives.

Furthermore, a model of narration that describes how the women in these groups hear the resonance between the life stories that are told to them and their own life stories avoids the assumption of dominance in recognition as a model of the relationship between the self and the other. Namely, the danger that seems to lurk in the model of recognition is that the self will have the upper hand if we are looking to the other in order to find ourselves, since we might not truly see the other but only see ourselves. Cavarero places a lot of emphasis in our desire to have a response from an other, for our stories to emerge from the mouths of others, but she clearly distinguishes this kind of recognition from the recognition of something familiar in the autobiographical narration one hears.¹⁶⁹ She states, "To recognize oneself in the other is indeed quite different from recognizing the irremedial uniqueness of the other."¹⁷⁰ Cavarero explicitly does not want us to listen to the stories of others in order to "digest" these tales in order to construct the meaning of our own stories.¹⁷¹

Cavarero is right to be shy of a model in which the self approaches another's story from a utilitarian perspective in which one sees only what benefits oneself in another's narrative or one misses what is truly different from one's own experience while looking for moments of recognition. Nonetheless, considering the way that the women talked about how

¹⁶⁹ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-23, for an overview of the different definitions of recognition and their significance in philosophy.

¹⁷⁰ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 91.

¹⁷¹ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 92.

they valued the different-ness of each other, I doubt that the women are in danger of missing the uniqueness of these published narratives and of each other's stories. While the Dames and some of the other groups in my study had a sense of group identity that they celebrated, they also valued the "diversity" of individuals in the group even when the group might seem quite uniform to an outsider.¹⁷² As in Christina's interpretation of her relationship with her mother in connection with Anne Lamott's narration of a similarly difficult relationship but that is difficult for very different reasons, the moments of symmetry between details in individuals' life stories are not necessarily recognitions of sameness, but more like hearing resonances. When we hear resonances between two notes, the notes do not lose their distinctiveness. Furthermore, as I argue above, the life stories or the interpretive wholes that are occasions by the moments of symmetry are never identical. The mirroring interpretations of one's life story are like the mirrors in a kaleidoscope in which the slightest shift sets of an entirely new pattern, a new pattern of a life in which some of the details may be the same but the whole story provides a quite different effect. None of the Dames expect that their stories will be identical to Joan's or to Krista Tippett's, but they do listen these other women's stories for resonances with their own experiences and their own life stories.

The alternative concern that arises when discussing models of subjectivity that involve recognition by an other is with another kind of misrecognition in which the other does not truly see the individuality of the self, but defines the individual in terms of circumstances and events or conformities to a social "type" As I have been arguing, the dynamic of resonating with the life story of someone else allows the uniqueness of the whole

¹⁷² See Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 109-113 for a discussion of how book group participants in Houston perceive more diversity in their groups than there actually is from the perspective of social demographics.

of story to be heard while the similarities in the details of individuals' experiences can also be heard. For instance, the influence and similarity in the stuff of narratives like fact that Joan and Krista Tippett were likely coming of age in the same contexts of geopolitical events and were both influenced by these events do not require these women's stories to be identical. In other words, the shared social identity that Joan and Krista Tippett have as white, Protestant women of roughly the same age does not impinge on the uniqueness of Joan's story or Krista Tippett's. Rather, this similarity provides a point of connection in which Joan can tell her unique story about her membership in a church in San Francisco in connection with the perspectives that Tippett narrates on her own life.

A relationship of resonance instead of one of recognition speaks to the deeper concern about mistaking the *what* of a life for the *who* in Cavarero's account. Ultimately, this concern is what drives Cavarero's use of a narrative account of identity, because what is told in narrative is the story of a *who* whose uniqueness is distinct from the *what*, the circumstances and events of a story. Cavarero takes this language of the "who" present in narrative identity from Arendt, who pushes against the confusion of the *who* of a story, the irremediable uniqueness of identity, with the *what*, the qualities that turn a protagonist into a type. Furthermore, Cavarero uses this distinction between the *who* and the *what* to argue against a philosophical approach in which universal language treats individuals as substitutable with one another in favor of a narrative approach. The underlying uneasiness with one's identity being recognized as a type, again, is a valid concern since no one wants to be seen as substitutable with someone else. Nonetheless, the uneasiness with "types" of identity can be correlated with the philosophical and political uneasiness with identities that originate externally and in socially-derived ways, as Alcoff argues in *Visible Identities* is

often attached to raced and gendered identities.¹⁷³ Cavarero admits that every unrepeatable identity is always intertwined with “various plural, typological identities –just as the *who* is always intertwined with the *what*.”¹⁷⁴ Yet, the privileging in her account of the uniqueness of the individual narrative does not provide space for the *what*, including socially-derived identities, to be an authentic expression of the self.

Most importantly for the reciprocal narrations among the groups I attended, religious identities would seem to fall into the category of the *what*, since religion, like race or gender, is a shared identity that is derived from external sources. Even if the characterizations of religion that circulate in the U.S. emphasize the private and even individual nature of religious identity, the fact is that religious identities are socially-shaped.¹⁷⁵ Like Augustine’s autobiography in which the “whole” or the meaning of his life is rooted in his experience of God, the women in the groups I attended look for a shared sense of meaning in their religious narratives. When Jamie prompts them, the women in the Quinn Temple group readily share examples from their lives of when “God remembered” them. They tell these stories with a shared sense of a God who intervenes on their behalf to save them from danger and combat their fear and a sense of themselves as recipients of that kind of intervention and care. Here again we see the two levels of resonance operating in the construction and interpretation of life narratives. The women find resonance between their own life stories and experiences of God and those of the other women in the group, but they also find resonance or a sense of the meaningful relationship between the details of their own lives and the larger picture of their lives through this shared religious identity.

¹⁷³ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47-83.

¹⁷⁴ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 74.

¹⁷⁵ I will discuss the connection between religion and the private sphere in the definition of religious insiders and outsiders more fully in chapter four.

Understanding the connections that are made between women's personal narratives in the context of religious reading groups as resonance instead of recognition opens up the possibility for understanding the influence that these women's stories have on each other as something other than dominance. The religious identities that resonate through these narratives as they are shared aloud with one another in the context of discussion are not necessarily identities that the women model for one another and then adopt for themselves. Rather, the influence that is exerted by the other women in the group is subtle as the women shape their own stories to resonate with the life stories they hear. Resonance preserves a sense of similarity and difference coexisting in the same phrase of music, yet at the same time one note can influence our perception of the whole piece. Ultimately, the dynamic of sharing personal examples and life stories turns out to display some of the ways that narrating one's own life story is an intersubjective process in which the self and the other co-construct life narratives. The women in these groups see their spiritual journeys as necessarily individualized, but they share the value of finding the meaning of their respective journeys in conversation with each other. Hearing and listening to one another's life stories especially as they intersect with religious and spiritual meanings is crucial in a process of constructing one's own meaningful story.

This relationship between the self and an other in the construction of identity differs from the model of recognition in which an other outside of the self grants the validity of the self's story. Certainly, it can be difficult to see the meaning in one's life as it is happening and others are often more able to see the design of our lives than we are. Nonetheless the imbrication of our stories with the stories of others is complex and perhaps even labyrinthine. One model of the relationship between self and other is unlikely to be sufficient as we tease

out these interconnections. The *how* of constructing of life stories is mostly invisible to us, but we can see the traces of how women resonate with the narratives they read and hear and how they listen for new perspectives on their understanding of their own lives in the personal examples that women share with one another.

In the next chapter, I will trace another way that self and other are intertwined in the formation of religious identity through the engagement with doctrinal texts. In addition, resonating with life stories is close to the process of imagining oneself as a character in text and trying on the perspectives of various perspectives that I discuss in chapter three. Resonating with the stories of others is only one of the ways that the self and other are interconnected in the practice of religious reading, yet the personal examples that are embedded in the reading practice represent one style of engagement with the other and one way that the self and others are both responsible for shaping the self. The intersubjectivity and intimacy built in these reading groups presents a challenge when attempting to disentangle the effects of the other on the self from the self's own self-fashioning power. The practice of resonating with the life stories of immediate or textual others describes the influence that the narratives of other women have on the process of self-interpretation, but this influence does not take the form of the self eclipsing the other or the the other's narrative eclipsing the self. In the end, the resonances of co-narration provides us with one modality of co-agency that becomes visible in the reading practices of Protestant women.

Chapter Two: Struggling and Wallowing: Internalizing Theological Texts

When discussing the role of the “other” in the formation of the religious subject, the other that is often considered the most problematic for feminist conceptions of the self and of agency is the religious tradition itself, or more specifically, the authority given to religious tradition and women’s submission to that authority. The disposition of submission to the authority of an other, in whatever guise it appears, seems to be a style of engagement with the other that erases the self and contains an abdication of individual agency. For example, in the Mysterion meeting I describe in the introduction, the women embraced the idea that in order to enter the kingdom of God, they must be childlike in their dependency on God and avoid being self-sufficient.¹⁷⁶ Although most of the Mysterion women would identify as feminists, they seem in this conversation to be giving away their adult selves and agency to the divine other in a way that would make many feminists uncomfortable. The Mysterion women did not specify the situations or the ways in which they should practice dependency in this conversation, and so it is not clear whether or not their expression of religious identity through dependence would actually conflict with feminist values. Still, the feminist critiques of women’s subordination in society have sometimes so thoroughly critiqued all hierarchical structures that submission to any kind of authority seems anathema within feminist systems of value. Within these critiques, the style of engagement with the other in which the other has authority over the self seems to inherently contain the threat of harm or oppression.

To move from the unspecified threat to the self from the divine other or from the authority of religious tradition, this chapter describes and analyzes the practices of reading religious texts that contain or encourage adherence to traditional religious perspectives. This

¹⁷⁶ Mysterion meeting, January 12, 2010.

genre of theological or doctrinal texts appeared alongside practices of reading I am calling *wallowing* and *struggling*. Wallowing in and struggling with a doctrinal text describes the process by which and extent to which readers internalize the perspectives of a text. Therefore, this chapter considers the style of engagement with the other implied by the practices of wallowing in and struggling with a text. Ultimately, a close analysis of the practice of struggling with a text exposes the multiplicity of others who are present, active, and engaged by the women in the practice of religious reading. I consider the usefulness of a “pluritopic hermeneutics” to describe this kind of religious reading and also how, given the multiplicity of actors at play in the process of struggling with a text, the effects of religious reading can be difficult if not impossible to trace.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, I move beyond the feminist difficulties with representing the agency of religious women as anything other than the free exercise of agency over against the agency of an other or an abdication of agency in order to submit to an other. Instead, I offer the foundations of an account of religious women’s agency in which the self engages with multiple others in the construction of religious outcomes.

The Genre of Doctrine

The genre of doctrine includes a variety of materials that are concerned with the conceptual content of the Christianity or what the women in these groups should know, understand and believe about Christianity. Doctrine was the most frequently read genre during the time I spent with these groups and as a result, was also the genre that contained the most internal variety. In the groups in my study, this genre is represented by doctrinal

¹⁷⁷ As I indicated in the introduction, I am following Linda Martín Alcoff’s use of this term in *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124-125, where she draws this idea from Raimundo Panikkar, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo.

sections of the Bible, theological texts written for a popular audience and topical Bible study materials that drew from several sections of the Bible to support theological content. In order to delineate the contours of this genre, I will describe each of these kinds of doctrinal texts and the three groups that read these materials who are included in this chapter.

The Breathing Space Wednesday group meets on Wednesday evenings as part of a larger program of women's study groups called Breathing Space at a large predominantly white middle to upper-middle class evangelical church. The Thursday morning group from this same church is described in the next chapter on reading narratives in the Bible. The Breathing Space program was divided into semesters and during the fall semester, the Wednesday group read a book called *God is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* by John Piper.¹⁷⁸ John Piper is a Baptist minister and a popular evangelical writer who is known for his book *Desiring God: Meditations from a Christian Hedonist*.¹⁷⁹ The genre of Piper's writings are theological with an emphasis on individual beliefs and the *God is the Gospel* book lays out a systematic argument for the idea that the experience of God is the goal of the Christian life. Piper argues from the Bible but also other theological sources like the work of Jonathan Edwards and no one biblical text or narrative frames his text. In the spring, the Wednesday group studied the book of Romans and shifted from a discussion-based format to a class format, where most of the meetings took the form of a lecture.¹⁸⁰ Romans is Paul's longest letter in the Bible and it contains a sustained theological argument that forms the basis for much of evangelical Protestant theology. While there was

¹⁷⁸ John Piper, *God is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005).

¹⁷⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God, Revised Edition: Meditations from a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs, CO:Multnomah Books, 2011). The first edition was published in 1986.

¹⁸⁰ The group did not have an agreed upon version. I noticed women using the New International Version, the English Standard Version, and the King James Version of the Bible.

a significant difference in the group's format between the fall and spring semesters in Wednesday Breathing Space and a difference in the authoritative weight of the texts they read, I have grouped these semesters together because of the shared conceptual and doctrinal features of the texts under discussion in this group.

The African-American group that I attended also met on Wednesdays, but at noon rather than the evening and therefore attracted mostly retired women or women who did not work. For the first part of the time I attended this group, the group was using a video Bible study series called *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith* taught by Beth Moore.¹⁸¹ This video series included presentations by Beth Moore that had been taped in a large church in Texas and was accompanied by a workbook with handouts to fill in during the presentations and homework to be completed throughout the week. This Bible study can be categorized as a “topical Bible study,” which means that although the majority of the study is spent reading material from the Bible, the study draws from many areas of the Bible at once rather than one book. A topical study is organized around whatever framework best makes its theological or doctrinal argument. In the case of *Believing God*, Beth Moore organized her video series around a “Five Statement Pledge of Faith,” which included five propositional statements about God and what it means to believe God as a Christian. Moore also used the narratives in the Hebrew Bible about the Israelites taking possession of their promised land as illustrations and particularly the figure of Joshua as an exemplar of what it means to believe God. While these examples use some “getting into the world of the text” to make them lively forceful examples, the larger practice of reading that Beth Moore models in her study is distinct from the practice of reading biblical narratives as I describe it in the

¹⁸¹ Beth Moore, *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2002), DVD. Also Beth Moore, *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith – Member Book* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2002).

next chapter. I have classified this video series in the genre of theological or doctrinal texts based on this “topical” arrangement.

The final group that I want to discuss in this chapter is the Dames and the Divine group that met on Wednesday mornings. This group of mostly retired white women met in a large mainline Protestant church that was situated on the more liberal end of the Protestant theological continuum. While I attended this group of lively women, they read two texts that I am treating in this chapter. The first is a collection of sermons called *The Will of God* by a British minister named Leslie Weatherhead, who was prominent during World War II.¹⁸² These sermons were delivered during the war and provided a theological framework in which to understand the devastation that his community was experiencing during the war. The largely conceptual content of these written sermons place them squarely in the genre of doctrinal or theological texts that is the focus of this chapter.

After reading *The Will of God*, the Dames and the Divine group decided to experiment with a reading practice called *lectio divina* (divine reading). *Lectio divina* is a prayerful or meditative practice of reading that derives from the rules for Benedictine monks and was developed in distinctive ways by several other monastic orders. The practice starts with repetitively reading a very small section of scripture, at most three verses, then moves to meditating on that passage and finally to prayer and contemplation of the meaning of the passage. The practice was revived in many different Christian communities in the 20th-century and sometimes adapted as a group reading practice. The Dames and the Divine group selected the gospel of Mark as the basis for their *lectio divina* practice and had that week’s leader select a few verses for the group to use. Although Mark is a narrative text, the practice of focusing on a few verses at a time meant that more often than not the verses that

¹⁸² Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1944).

were selected contained little or no narrative elements. For instance, the verses selected might contain the words of Jesus' teaching without the narrative context that describes Jesus as the speaker and the situation in which he spoke. In essence, the practice of *lectio divina* has the potential to transform the genre of a text from narrative into doctrine. For this reason I am including the Dames' reading of Mark through *lectio divina* with the genre of theological texts. In contrast, we will see in the next chapter how the book of Mark is read with the narrative elements of the text fully in view and the doctrinal elements receding into the background.

All of these texts--a book by a popular evangelical theologian, Paul's letter to the Romans, a video series on what it means to "believe God," sermons written during WWII and the book of Mark read under the practice of *lectio divina*--share the characteristic that they seek to communicate Christian beliefs or ideas and have these ideas accepted or absorbed by those who read them. These texts aim primarily to change the way Christians think and feel, hoping that in so doing to change individuals' behavior, but only as a secondary result. In other words, these texts are not preaching for or against particular practices or behaviors themselves. These texts differ, however, in the authoritative weight that they carry in Christian discourse and in their historical distance from the groups reading them. The biblical texts both carry more authority as texts containing material that should be accepted by the reader and sometimes pose more difficulty for these readers because of their historical distance. Nonetheless, in the groups that I visited this broad genre of doctrinal texts are accompanied by similar reading practices that reflect these texts' aim at absorption or acceptance. My argument is that some of the characteristics of these reading practices, as distinguished from reading practices that engage narrative texts as described in the next

chapter, derive from the conceptual and propositional nature of the doctrinal genre. The conceptual content of these texts coupled with the teaching modality of the texts themselves and in the Christian tradition surrounding them aims at “belief” or the assent to spiritual or theological truths. Similarly, the reading practices that I describe in this chapter are also aimed at adopting religious perspectives and therefore represent some of the reading practices most typically associated with religious reading.

Struggling and Wallowing

Vicky: I hope that while we are studying Romans that you’re spending a little time every day...And I don’t know if your quiet time normally is 15 minutes or an hour or more, but I hope you are using your quiet time during this study to wallow in Romans. That’s when you’re really going to hear from God from this message. So the questions that will be raised as you go back and just meditate on, “Gosh, here are all the things Paul says about god in chapter 1.” If that’s all you get done in a week, that’s huge! As God begins to speak to you about what he’s saying but then it works its way into your own circumstances and your own thinking. And in Romans 12 we’re going to get to Paul’s famous verse, (quoting) *do not be conformed to this world but be transformed how? by the renewing of your mind*. We are only renewed in our mind as we absorb and assimilate the word of God in our thinking.¹⁸³

Rhonda: Surely, God is big enough that this didn’t have to happen for God’s plan to be fulfilled. [I’m] saying what you’re saying, did we have to have these people to be killed and lynched for us to be where we are today. I have difficulty with that. I have difficulty with when little kids are starving and killed and molested and all of that, I think, “Okay, God.” When I talked to a woman on the phone who needs help with her family, her little girl is handicapped for life because her father shook her. I have difficulty when somebody has done me wrong and I want to get back at them so much and I don’t. But it appears to me...that they are just flourishing, up into the sky, all of their dreams and goals are being met. I’m just like, “God?” I have difficulty with that. I still struggle with that today.¹⁸⁴

In my use of the terms *wallowing* and *struggling* to describe these reading strategies, I am drawing on terms used by the women themselves. The quotations above show a little bit about how these terms are used by the women in the groups I visited. However, I will use

¹⁸³ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, February 3, 2010.

¹⁸⁴ Quinn Temple meeting, February 10, 2010.

these terms in this chapter to describe larger strategies of religious reading in ways that the women would not necessarily have. In particular, the women in these groups might evaluate the religious effects of their reading practices differently than I do here. I am evaluating the effects of these practices as reported and observed in the discussion groups themselves and in ways that are relevant for the feminist theories of subjectivity that engage the relationship between the individual and society in the formation of the self.¹⁸⁵

As I am using the term in this chapter, *wallowing* refers to a (stereo)typically religious type of reading in that the reader is submitting oneself to the text and being shaped by it.¹⁸⁶ The term came to my attention in Vicky's lessons during the second semester of the Breathing Space Wednesday group. Since *wallowing* does not refer to an obviously recognizable reading strategy, I was puzzled by what wallowing in a text would look like in a practical application. Yet this imprecise term allowed Vicky to communicate that she was most concerned with the change effected in the reader by the text and so she was urging the women in her group to keep reading the text until that change was experienced. She does not

¹⁸⁵ I did ask questions that were aimed at the general impact of group participation in my interviews, but did not ask about the effects of particular reading strategies the group used. See my discussion on the limits of the usefulness of interviews for evaluating these reading practices in my introduction.

¹⁸⁶ Wallowing bears similarities to the type of reading strategies that Paul Griffiths describes in *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*, though in less elaborately codified and institutionally supported ways (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). In the case of evangelical reading practices, others have described the approach to reading for religious effects as the life-application method. See Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111-115; Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 214; Erin A. Smith, "'What Would Jesus Do?' The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace," *Book History* 10 (2007), 206-7. For Frykholm this grows out of an approach to reading the Bible she calls the life-application method, which Lofton compares to the reading practices in Oprah's Book Club and Smith compares to the sermons and novels of social gospel preachers like Charles Sheldon. J. Bradley Wigger also describes a method of interpretation that privileges application in "Gracious Words: A Presbyterian Bible Study" in Robert Wuthnow ed., *I Come Away Stronger*, 46-47. See also Erin A. Smith, "'Jesus My Pal': Reading and Religion in Middlebrow America" *Canadian Review of American Studies: Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 37, no. 2 (2007), 150, for a discussion on how Bruce Barton's readers read his work as "equipment for living."

define the change she hoped for, but she models it by describing how her reading has given her a deeper understanding of the text and of God. In the Breathing Space Wednesday group and in the practices of the Quinn Temple group and, to a certain extent, the Dames and the Divine, therefore, wallowing can refer to memorizing a text, contemplating it through sustained focus or repetitive reading, or using comprehension strategies that allow one to learn a text well enough to teach it to someone else. The “submission” to the text refers to the fact that the change that is the goal of such repetitive reading is to conform one’s experience to the text. The reader does not exercise judgment of what to accept or not to accept, so that the issue is rather one of understanding rather than rejection if the text does not seem to match up with one’s experience. Therefore, *really* understanding the text comes when there is no distance between one’s subjectivity and the outlook prescribed by the text.

The process of struggling with a text or with a concept comes out of the reality that submission to the text is not so easy or straightforward as simply reading the text over and over. In many ways, the women in these groups described ways that they struggled to internalize or accept the concepts that they were reading and to experience the change that reading the Bible or another theological text was supposed to effect. In a basic sense, to struggle means to try to do something and either to not succeed at doing it or to have a very hard time doing so. In terms of religious subjectivity, the women in all of these groups talked about struggling with sin and struggling to be better, in other words struggling to change their behavior or their perspective on their lives. In other words, the women use the word struggle to acknowledge the distance between their own subjectivities and the actions or subjectivities prescribed by their religious tradition. In reading group discussions, to say that I am struggling with this part of the text or I struggled with that, is to say that I disagreed

with this text *but* I am trying to agree with it because I understand that it might have something to teach me or I might be wrong. It is a way to talk openly about the distance between your views and the views of the text while still declaring a desire to be in proximity with it. In the practice of ‘struggling’ with a text, the evaluative mode is fully operative, *but* the reader’s disposition is openness towards the text because it bears the imprimatur of tradition. It’s as if the possibility of rejection and the impossibility of rejection are operating at the same time.

In practice, therefore, struggling with a text and wallowing in it are inextricably related, because ideally one wallows in the text until one’s subjectivity is perfectly in line with the text, but in reality the experience can be marked by clashing between worldviews and a struggle to conform one’s subjectivity to the text. However, in the discourses of these reading groups, struggling and wallowing also are distinct modes of talking about one’s relationship to the text. To admit that one struggles with the text is to admit a distance between oneself and the text that wallowing does not entail and to voice one’s own evaluations of the text. Wallowing, on the other hand, describes an immediacy in which there is no distance at all between oneself and the text, even if this immediacy represents more of an ideal than a reality.

Here I am avoiding Gadamer’s description of the “fusion of horizons” to describe the goal of wallowing in the text because to do so would entail an overly simplistic reading of this process in Gadamer and because I am not convinced that it has explanatory power for this ethnographic situation.¹⁸⁷ Certainly, the women in these groups want a “fusion of

¹⁸⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1989), 305. For a summary of the process of the fusion of horizons in Gadamer and how it has been overly simplified, see Marie Fleming’s “Gadamer’s

horizons” between themselves and the text and when they are successful, it might look like Gadamer’s fusion of horizons in terms of an event of understanding that is aimed at application. However, the process of projecting a historical horizon in order to overcome whatever is alien in the text that Gadamer proposes does not seem to match the reading practice of these women. From my perspective, Gadamer’s account of this process seems more prescriptive of an ideal process of understanding and is perhaps not intended to be descriptive of every process of understanding.

Nevertheless, Gadamer’s definition of a “horizon” as “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” becomes useful in describing the emergence of struggling with a text in the process of wallowing in it.¹⁸⁸ *Struggling* arises when there are visions of reality in the experience of the world of the reader, like modern skepticism about the supernatural, that compete with the horizon of the text. The religious reader is then faced with a problem because the authority of the text requires that one agree with the text and the struggling religious reader seeks to bring oneself into conformity with the horizon of the text. But the reality is that this is easier said than done, a reader cannot simply will away these differences. The language of struggling with a text describes the religious position in relationship to a text in which the reader continues to read and grapple with a text in the hopes that one’s subjectivity will eventually become closer to the horizon of the text, all the while the reader is acknowledging the distance between herself and the text.

Conversation: Does the Other Have a Say?” in Lorraine Code ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (University Park, PA: Penn. State University Press, 2003), especially 124-127.

¹⁸⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301. This is also an oversimplification of Gadamer’s account, since in order to attain the fusion of horizons Gadamer argues that the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter are actually part of the same horizon for Gadamer (see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305).

At the end of this chapter, I will return to the idea of competing horizons in the process of religious reading as an instance for the application of what Linda Martín Alcoff calls a pluritopic hermeneutics. Alcoff identifies the failure in Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to account for the multiple subjectivities and perspectives within the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter as the weakness of Gadamer's account.¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, the reality of multiple and often competing perspectives in the conversations around doctrinal texts leads to the refracting of the effects of religious reading in the interaction multiple causes or agents. Struggling with the text is possibly inevitable since even the individual women who are aiming at conforming their perspectives to the text by wallowing are not doing this reading practice alone.

Is Struggling Liberal and Wallowing Conservative?

While the five groups in my dissertation and the three groups that I am focusing on in this chapter are admittedly an extremely small sample, it is still possible to comment on the reading traditions of which these groups are a part. Since the groups in my study are part of the liberal Protestant, evangelical and African-American traditions of American Protestantism, one would expect there to be differences in the groups' reading practices based on their membership in these different traditions. In particular, one might expect the Bible to play a less prominent role for more liberal groups of Protestants and for liberal Protestants to more openly struggle with and entertain the possibility of rejection of the Bible. However, also as one might expect, the close reading of these group's practices provides a level of complexity that is hard to classify into simple dichotomies. All of the

¹⁸⁹ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology" in Lorraine Code ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (University Park, PA: Penn. State University Press, 2003), 255.

groups that I visited read the Bible as well as contemporary Bible study guides and works of theology. And all of the groups in this chapter, those who read theological texts in the Bible and outside of it, engaged in wallowing and struggling in their strategies of reading these texts. Even though the time that the Dames and the Divine group spent reading the Bible was anomalous for their own practices of reading, their reading practice still shared features of wallowing in the text, or in other words, they approached the Bible in their reading practice with similar kinds of reverence as other groups did.

That is not to say that there were not differences between the liberal and conservative groups I visited in their treatment of the Bible. Liberal Protestant, evangelical and African-American Protestants each have their own traditions of reading, which governed the group's reading selections and the larger theological frameworks in which these texts were read. This is particularly the case with secondary texts, either Bible study guides or non-biblical theological texts. Each group is more likely to select these secondary sources written by those who are part of their own theological tradition. For instance, the evangelical Breathing Space Wednesday group read a book by John Piper, a popular writer who identifies himself as evangelical and is respected within evangelical circles. On the other hand, the Dames and the Divine group read a book by Leslie Weatherhead, a respected liberal Protestant preacher who was a contemporary of C.S. Lewis. This text selection sometimes can extend to the choice of books of the Bible itself; the Breathing Space Wednesday group's choice to study the book of Romans is typical for an evangelical group. The book of Romans is recognized as one of the foundational biblical texts of evangelical theology, especially supporting the idea of salvation by substitutional atonement. Paul Griffiths in his book *Religious Reading* describes one of the characteristics of pre-modern religious reading as including a trust in the

authority of the religious hierarchy to choose what is appropriate to read.¹⁹⁰ While the authority of tradition in the American Protestant context is much more diffuse than the official imprimatur of the Catholic church, markers of what is evangelical or Christian are still used to select which texts are safe to wallow in.

In the selection of which secondary sources are approved for assisting in reading the Bible, the use or non-use of what is called “historical-critical” scholarship on the Bible is a significant difference between liberal and conservative groups in my study.¹⁹¹ This academic study of the Bible investigates the production of the biblical texts in their historical contexts and does not presume a supernatural origin for the production of these texts. In essence, this approach to the Bible is not reading the Bible religiously and one might expect the fact that liberal Protestants have embraced historical-critical scholarship to lead to less religious reading strategies in their use of the Bible. At the very least, considering the Bible in its original historical and cultural context emphasizes the gap between the reader’s context and the context of the text and interposes a distance between the reader and the text that is the antithesis of wallowing. In theory, the historical-critical method would introduce an evaluative mode into the process of reading. Thus, rather than being able to approach the Bible as fully sanctioned by the tradition as a text to wallow in, the reader would first have to make a choice whether or not to accept the worldview of the text. In reality, the historical-critical scholarship and wallowing in the text did not appear to be mutually-exclusive reading strategies.

¹⁹⁰ Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*, 60-72.

¹⁹¹ See Kathryn Lofton, “The Methodology of the Modernists: Process in American Protestantism,” *Church History*, 75, no. 2 (2006), 374-402, for a discussion of the embrace or rejection of social-scientific approaches to Christian thought have been considered the defining “affinities” in the difference between fundamentalists and modernist Protestants.

The evangelical groups and the evangelical materials in my study want to guard against “intellectualism” in reading the Bible and looked for other signs of orthodoxy or evangelical credentials before accepting scholarship about the Bible. It seems that they are concerned that such an approach would interfere with wallowing or worse, erode the religious importance of the Bible. The evangelical groups’ concern would seem to be born out in the example of the avowedly liberal Dames and the Divine group, who except for the *lectio divina* experiment I will describe below, had never read the Bible together as a group in the ten years that they had been meeting. Furthermore, in my interviews with individuals from the Dames, almost none of the women in this group read the Bible personally on a daily basis or expressed a desire that they wanted to do so more. Yet, this does not exclude the Bible as central to the practice of this particular church or variety of Christianity, rather that this group had simply formed as a group that read books of a particular genre, of theology and spirituality.¹⁹² A number of women from Mysterion, the group of younger women from the same liberal Protestant church, said that they had a practice reading the Bible daily or expressed a desire to do so at about the same rate as the women I interviewed from Breathing Space, the evangelical group.

The historical-critical approach to the Bible is also more muted in its influence on the reading practices of average liberal Christians for the fact that it is an approach used in academic circles and is therefore used more often by clergy who have received mainline Protestant theological education. In the groups in my study, however, the leaders who had been trained in historical-critical method did not necessarily shape the reading practices of their group to include this body of scholarship. As I will discuss in the next chapter,

¹⁹² In “The Methodology of the Modernists,” Kathryn Lofton argues that the engagement with the Bible and with Jesus were non-negotiable for modernist Protestant thinkers.

Christina the leader of Mysterion, was seminary trained and did share some historical-biblical scholarship with the group at the group's own request. Yet Mysterion's discussions of the Bible were more marked by the practice of imagining oneself in the world of the text, which is the genre of reading in the next chapter, not by the use of historical biblical scholarship. The majority of readers in the groups I studied with did not have theological education and their leaders seemed to refrain from passing on historical-critical methods of reading to the women in their groups.

Jamie, the pastor of the African-American church and leader of the African-American study group, is an example of someone who navigates the apparent tensions between the historical-critical methods she learned in seminary and the religious reading strategies I am describing in this chapter.¹⁹³ While I was attending her group, Jamie had the opportunity to respond to the criticisms of an "intellectual" approach to the Bible, since these criticisms were voiced by the Beth Moore, an evangelical, in the video series the group was watching. In response to Beth Moore's expectation that we believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, Jamie comments that she is comfortable with the idea that not all of the Bible is God's word as a result of her seminary training.¹⁹⁴ Later, when we were studying the Psalms, Jamie was also used her Jewish Publication Society Bible and appreciatively read the historical-critical notes in her margins. Yet at other times, she also suggests that what she learned in seminary is unnecessary for the life of faith. In the same meeting where she mentions that not all the Bible need be God's word, Jamie also asserts that what God says to Abraham and David about forgiveness in the Bible, God also says to us who read the Bible. She takes a pragmatic approach to the dissonances between the view of the Bible in her faith

¹⁹³ This may have happened more often because of my attendance and her recognition of me as someone who has received similar seminary training.

¹⁹⁴ Quinn Temple meeting, October 21, 2009.

communities and what she learned and she criticizes her classmates who got “hung up” on these details. She asserts that in that situation one should just write whatever the professor wants in order to get an A and she agreed with her professor who said that, “Jesus doesn’t need you to defend him.”¹⁹⁵ As we will see in the next chapter among the Mysterion women, the possibility of the historical fallibility of a text does not actually necessitate rejection or preclude adopting the strategy of wallowing in the text for Jamie. In her practices of reading, Jamie suggests that a historical critical approach to the text and a wallowing approach to the text are not actually mutually exclusive.

On the whole, this difference in the uses of biblical scholarship did not seem to lead to a major difference in the practices of reading that these groups used. The groups that use historical-biblical scholarship would be thought to be more likely to struggle with the biblical text rather than to wallow in it, since historical scholarship would allow them a more questioning stance in relationship to the Bible. And that evangelical groups would be more likely to openly struggle with non-biblical texts and never to struggle openly with biblical texts. The Dames and the Divine group did more openly discuss ways that they struggle with and disagree with the biblical text than any other group, but this openness to disagreeing with the biblical text was not shared by the other mainline group, Mysterion. Unfortunately, the data I gathered does not include evangelical and mainline groups who were both reading theological biblical texts. For instance, if I had two groups reading Romans or even another group reading a more theological genre in the Bible like another one of Paul’s epistles, I might be more comfortable making the claim that mainline Protestants more openly struggle with the Bible than evangelical Protestants.

¹⁹⁵ Quinn Temple meeting, October 21, 2009.

Even the force of shared Protestant tradition in the reading practice is ambiguous in terms of determining which texts one should wallow in. The information I gathered about these groups shows wallowing and struggling to be generally separated along the lines of the authoritative characteristics of texts in that no one I studied with seemed to wallow in non-biblical texts and everyone struggled more openly with non-biblical texts. So, while wallowing seems to be practiced in relation to the Bible, whose religious authority is without question, I am convinced that these reading practices bleed into each other and transgress the boundaries of canonical or non-canonical of texts. For instance, there is evidence that the practice of wallowing in a text is less genre-based in the sense that the Dames and the Divine *wallowed* in the book of Mark through *lectio divina* even though Mark is the genre of biblical narrative. In this case the narrative elements of the text receded because of the *lectio divina* practice of selecting one verse to read repeatedly and on which to meditate. This suggests that the genres of reading I am describing are not mutually exclusive but can intermingle, or can be in close proximity with each other and can be switched between with ease. Furthermore, because wallowing is more metaphorical and less delineated of a practice, several practices theoretically could come under its umbrella or be mixed with it. As I discuss above, wallowing does not necessarily preclude struggling with a text, especially in cases where there is a struggle to understand a text or a struggle to put the text in action. As I delve into examples drawn from the discussions in these groups below, I believe that the intermingling of struggling with and wallowing in a text will become more evident.

Wallowing: Breathing Space Strategies for Internalizing Texts

Vicky: Repeatedly you want to go back and say, “What overall is the message, what am I learning?” I like to wallow in it. To me this is what really helps you look at the word of God as a diamond. And you know how the facets on each diamond, every time

you turn a diamond the color changes a little bit and that's what happens. When I go to chapter one of Romans and I say, "What is God telling me about himself?" That's a whole different meditation and a whole different experience with him than if I'm going and saying, "What is he telling me about faith?" Going back and just emphasizing a different aspect and you begin to get a very well-rounded view and so many messages. That's why you can go back and study and study and never plumb the depths of the word of God.¹⁹⁶

Vicky:...I hope you just got to wallow in those scriptures [that I provided last week] and really begin to absorb the attributes of your father. I mean think about it, his whole purpose, as he's going to tell us in verse 28, is to make us like him, so we kind of need to know what that looks like.¹⁹⁷

Vicky, the teacher who led the Wednesday Breathing Space Bible study on Romans, repeatedly emphasized the need to *truly* understand the doctrines in Romans. As a step to this deeper understanding, she often encouraged the study participants to "wallow" in the book of Romans for homework in statements like the two I have included above. As I began to understand what Vicky meant by "wallowing" in the text, I also began to see how *wallowing* was a good term to describe a family of strategies for internalizing doctrinal texts. In the Breathing Space Wednesday, Dames and the Divine, and Quinn Temple groups, the women were encouraged to adopt strategies of reading where one reads repetitively in order to somehow effect a change in one's spiritual self or one's outlook on the world. The term *wallowing* is more metaphorical than precise, which corresponds to the fact that these strategies of reading do not necessarily specify how the repetition will lead to this change. Nonetheless, I am arguing that the term encompasses a variety of concrete reading strategies that share the same goals as practices of religious reading.

In one of Vicky's first lessons on the book of Romans, she used two examples to explain the reading strategies she wanted the study participants to learn during the semester-long series on Romans. First, she passed out a handout that applied Bloom's taxonomy of

¹⁹⁶ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, February 3, 2010.

¹⁹⁷ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, April 28, 2010.

learning to Bible study skills in order to explain how she wanted the women to be able to have a deeper understanding of the book of Romans. Bloom's taxonomy of learning describes six levels of learning that begin with the most simple skill of being able to recall information, a skilled learned through memorization, and end with the most complex skill where one can evaluate ideas.¹⁹⁸ Vicky stated that she wanted the study of Romans to help the women move beyond the first three levels of knowledge, comprehension and application onto the higher levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Yet her second example seemed to flip this hierarchy of skills on its head by placing memorization and meditation as the most desirable strategies for reading the Bible.¹⁹⁹ She had Jessica hold a copy of the Bible by two fingers and showed how easily Vicky could take the book away from her. This grasp on the Bible was correlated with just having had read the Bible. Yet when Jessica was holding the Bible by four and then five fingers, the Bible could not easily be taken from her grasp and this was an illustration of how memorization and meditation deepens one's grasp on the Bible. While these two examples seem at odds with one another, I believe that Vicky meant for them illustrate the importance of knowing the Bible really well in order to reach the "deeper" understanding that was necessary for effecting spiritual change.

Throughout the semester, the strategies that Vicky modeled for the women in the study trended more towards memorization. She enacted a kind of repetitive reading strategy in her presentations of the material in Romans by reviewing the sections of Romans we had read in previous weeks at the start of each lesson. This repetitive strategy had the unintended effect of ending the semester in chapter 8 of the book, rather than being able to cover all 16

¹⁹⁸ Benjamin Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1956). I am not sure where Vicky obtained the popularized version that she presented to the group.

¹⁹⁹ Vicky likely means to focus on a text by slowly or repetitively reading a text when she says "meditation," though she did not define her use of this term.

chapters. Another strategy that Vicky used aid in the internalization of the book of Romans included providing conceptual outlines as frameworks in which to be able to remember the whole argument of the book of Romans easily. The outline that Vicky repeated the most often was a list of five s-words with accompanying hand motions: “Sinners (for chapters 1-3:2), Saved through grace by faith in Jesus Christ (for 3:21-5), Sanctified through the Holy Spirit (for 6-8), by the Sovereignty of God (for 9-11), for God’s Service (for 12-16).”²⁰⁰ The theological emphasis of this outline exemplifies the emphasis on conceptual understanding in the process of internalizing or wallowing in a text. Vicky also gave out additional theological texts, mostly drawn from internet resources but also from published commentaries, to help explain concepts like “sin” throughout the course.

The emphasis on the doctrines of salvation described in the first part of Romans in Vicky’s outline and the fact that the group did not get past the first half of the book in the study are not surprising considering that the book of Romans is a foundational text for evangelical Christian theology. Brian Malley, in his book *How the Bible Works: An anthropological study of evangelical Biblicism*, describes the relationship between evangelical theology and the Bible as “transitive” and the evangelical reading strategy as a species of belief tradition rather than an interpretive tradition.²⁰¹ By this he means that the interpretive practices of evangelical Biblicism are centered on finding support for the beliefs that are passed down, rather than passing on specific practices of interpretation (or developing new doctrinal interpretations each time the text is read). Vicky’s emphasis on distilling the conceptual content of Romans for the participants to memorize illustrates that

²⁰⁰ Vicky first introduced this outline during the Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, February 24, 2010.

²⁰¹ Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 73.

understanding and transmitting the doctrine of substitutionary atonement that is drawn from Romans was a centrally important activity for this group. At times, this emphasis on substitutionary atonement shared features of a transitive reading strategy in that most of the group meetings were spent on chapters 1-5, which is where most of the support for substitutionary atonement theology is found. In addition, readings of Romans that support alternative theologies of salvation were not entertained.²⁰² However, since the interpretation of Romans as the basis for substitutionary atonement is so ingrained in Protestant reading traditions that most English translations use language that might lead the reader in that direction, it would be incorrect to say that Vicky was ‘merely’ finding support for her already formed doctrines in her reading strategies. It might be better to say that the text of Romans and the evangelical theological framework are mutually reinforcing here.

Another strategy for internalizing the text that Vicky modeled for the participants in the study was an approach that is colloquially called “word studies” in evangelical circles.²⁰³ This method of interpretation is what it sounds like, namely isolating words in the text and trying to understand their meaning as a stepping stone towards understanding the text more generally. This often meant that Vicky was providing the Greek word that is used in the text and explaining the meaning of that word. For instance, there was a lengthy discussion of the original uses of the word *baptizo* both within and outside of religious usage in the ancient

²⁰² In other words, substitutionary atonement is not an “arbitrary” reading of Romans, but it is not the only reading. Not my goal here to dispute the interpretation of Romans, so I will not detail how Vicky *could* have interpreted the text. For alternative readings of Romans see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: a Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); Mark D. Baker *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

²⁰³ I heard someone say at the dinner closing the fall Breathing Space semester that she had learned how to do word studies from Monica, the leader of the Thursday Breathing Space group, that semester. Breathing Space meeting, December 10, 2009.

Mediterranean.²⁰⁴ Word studies were also employed by listing all of the uses of a particular term like *law* or *flesh* in Romans on a sheet, so that the meaning could then be understood from the multiple usages of a term. However, word studies resembled a transitive reading strategy when employed more informally, for instance when the women were asked to define “churchy words” like sanctification or justification in their own words. This kind of analysis led to defining these terms in light of more modern usages of the terms, like using accounting or modern judicial examples to explain the meaning of justification, and often led to linking the text to theological frameworks supporting substitutionary atonement.²⁰⁵ At other times, individual words were compared to uses of the same term in other books of the Bible. This also seemed to admit “extra-textual” definitions since the comparisons were often made regardless of in what historical context the other books were written or even in what language they were written. A particularly striking example of this occurred when Vicky said the word *covetousness* used in Romans 7 was the same word used in the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis. Vicky provided the Hebrew word *hamad* for covetousness, even though clearly the book of Romans would not have used the same word since it was written in Greek.²⁰⁶ However, Vicky used this comparison to underscore a theological point about the root of sin being the desire of something that is not God, as Eve desired the apple.

²⁰⁴ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 24, 2010.

²⁰⁵ For instance, Vicky defined the concept of imputation through the use of the word *credited* in Romans 4 (NIV) in terms of Jesus having paid the debt for us, an idea that does not appear directly in Romans 4, which is about Abraham’s receiving righteousness credited to him because he believed God’s promise and that righteousness will be credited to those who believe in Jesus. “If someone sends me an invoice, I am obligated to pay it. And in order to be paid in full, someone has to either pay it or have to wipe it away from our account. But once that’s done, once I’ve been credited there is no record of any obligation. Just absorb that for a minute, no record in heaven of any obligation on your part.” Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 3, 2010.

²⁰⁶ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, April 14, 2010.

Vicky also repeatedly used grammar to make a theological point and she placed emphasis on the tense and mood of Greek verbs. In particular, verbs in the perfect tense were used to underscore the completedness of Christ's salvific work.²⁰⁷ The passive mood was also used to emphasize the doctrinal point that God does the action of salvation, not individual human beings.²⁰⁸ These kinds of grammatical points, and some of the word studies, seemed to belie the stated goal of teaching the women in the group these study skills, since they were unlikely to be able to or want to access these types of readings on their own. In these cases, these grammatical or historical lexical tools for reading are used in service of the larger goal of underscoring the biblical support for doctrinal ideas and encouraging the study participants to accept these doctrines. On the whole, the micrological study of a word is aimed at creating an intimate knowledge of the text, where one is familiar with the text on the level of each individual word.

In this way, the wallowing that Vicky is encouraging the other women in the study to practice is a kind of committing to knowledge that is both memorization and acceptance. The spiritual change in one's perspective that is supposed to be bound up with this acceptance is still somewhat elusive and in the format of this study as a class was not conducive to women sharing with each other evidence of this change. However, Vicky did emphasize how she had been changed by wallowing in these texts and cultivating a "deeper understanding."

Wallowing through *Lectio Divina* with Dames and the Divine

The practice of *lectio divina* is a strategy of wallowing in or internalizing the Bible that also utilizes repetition at the level of individual words, even if the theological concepts that the Dames and the Divine engaged were very different than those dealt with in the

²⁰⁷ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 10, 2010.

²⁰⁸ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 10, 2010.

Wednesday Breathing Space group. As I explained above, the practice of *lectio divina* is usually done individually as a way of focusing on and contemplating on the Bible and then connecting these contemplations to prayer, but in the 20th-century the practice has been adapted for use in groups. Kathleen was the one who suggested that the group try it out and she found guidelines for doing *lectio divina* as a group on the Internet.²⁰⁹ This online resource encouraged reading the text three times and allowing for a time of silent reflection and then a time of response aloud after each reading. After the first reading, participants are asked to pick out a word or phrase that attracted them; after the second reading, they are asked to share how the word or phrase touches their life; and then after the third reading, they are asked to share what that word prompts them to do that day or that week. In the first session, Kathleen explained the process as reading with an open heart, then finding a word that jumps out at you, and holding that in your heart.²¹⁰

These guidelines were passed around by the discussion leaders, but once the group had done it for a few weeks, the group had developed their own sense of the practice and adhered less closely to the suggested framework. In essence, the practice became that we would read the text aloud a few times and then go around the circle saying aloud the words or phrase that stuck out to us. We would then read the text again and, going around the circle again, explain why the word or phrase that we had picked was meaningful to us or what it encouraged us to do. The format that the Dames and the Divine utilized collapsed the second and third steps described above, mostly because with 15 people on average, going around the table three times would have taken longer than the time the group had. The Dames also tended to shorten the times of silent reflection after the text readings, and sometimes

²⁰⁹ Lectio Divina for Groups, <http://www.jesuits.ca/orientations/intro2lectio.html>. Accessed May 21, 2012.

²¹⁰ Dames and the Divine meeting, October 14, 2009

dispensed with it entirely. The group was more likely to want to discuss the comments that each woman offered and some women even had a hard time keeping themselves to a word or phrase in the first round as well, being eager to explain their choice. Ultimately, *lectio divina* as the Dames and the Divine practiced it was less a quiet contemplation of the text and more a discussion practice that centered on isolated words or phrases in the text and repetitive reading aloud.

In addition to the repetitive reading aloud of the text, a different kind of repetition appears in their comments as many of the women say the same words aloud in succession, in the round where the words that attracted are articulated. Furthermore, in the next round often the women return to the same or similar ideas in their explanations of how the words they picked relate to their lives, like a theme and variations. Elise led the conversation below in response to Mark 5:25-30 in which a woman, who has been suffering from hemorrhages for several years and has spent all of her money trying to be healed by physicians, is healed by simply touching Jesus' cloak in the press of the crowd.²¹¹ Jesus feels the power go out from him and turns around to ask who touched his cloak. The women ruminate together on the word "touch" in this passage and connect it their own lives in different ways. Since the women were going around the circle, they are not necessarily directly responding to each other's comments, but in the excerpt below you can see how the two themes of touching God or having a connection with God and touching one another were revisited and became intertwined in their comments.

In response to the question of how this reading touches your life...

Janice: I think that touching, sometimes people think or *I* think, that you have to get very into God and talk a lot. But I think sometimes just one little thing he understands....

Brenda: For me, wellness is in the touch of god. If you can be close enough that represents

²¹¹ Dames and the Divine meeting, October 28, 2009

connection, if you are connected you don't even need words. As you were saying Elise, the touch itself releases the power and it is immediate....

Loretta: ...I kind of agree with Brenda. I think touch is...it's through touch love is conveyed. Touch and love would be to me in this sense synonymous. She has great faith and the faith and the love and the touch are circular, that's why they heal her...

Elise: Well to me, the touch and the healing. The fact that her faith was so strong that she knew that she didn't have to say anything, all she had to do is touch the garment and the power would come. It says to me that perhaps I don't have enough faith sometimes that things will work out and that there is divine help or strength, whatever is needed. She just touched and it came....

In response to the question about what you are going to do with this in your life...

Betty: Well I'm thinking in terms of my sister who has been sick and my recent little detour to [the] hospital and so forth. And my telling myself that I couldn't drive, which actually no doctor had told me after I got to thinking about it. It was just in the visiting nurse stuff it said if you're out driving, you may not be eligible for visiting nurse services, which sort of makes sense. But at any rate I am driving and I need to reestablish some contact. I've been calling her on the phone and all that, and she is back home. That's another whole story which I won't go into. She's better, she's enough better to be back home, but she's not well, she's not whole. When you were talking about that, I'm thinking she's not well, she's not whole. And it's been a respite for me, which I think I really needed, but now is the time for the reentry for me to somehow figure out how to visit her. It is making me think that it's time for me to make a reentry in person rather than just on the phone.

Brenda: For me it is to work harder to keep the connection tight. The compassion and power to answer need is always there, but as the man was asked to stretch out his hand before, I need to reach, I need to work at keeping the connection.

Barbara: For me, most recently I've been the grateful recipient of cards and all kinds of love. When I read this I thought, you know, I didn't do a thing, and yet here comes this love pouring in. And I'm thinking this woman, actually she didn't ask for an audience with Jesus. She didn't demand anything, she just wanted to just touch his robe. And I thought this touches me because I just love the people whose lives I can touch and they can touch mine. I feel that I don't have to be rich, I don't have to be powerful, I don't have to be the most intelligent. I can just be and want to touch and there it is and I'm grateful.

Janice: I have to learn that I can't do it all and if I touch, things will happen.

Kathleen: (eyes closed) I intend to make it a practice this week to feel in my body especially...the connection...that causes both, that awakens all the spiritual energy in me as it recognizes all the greater spiritual energy that comes across in touching, in a meditative moment, in my lecto divino [sic] next week...Feel in my, really be conscious of the way it feels inside my body and I will use my attention to focus that way this week.

Donna: I want to spend more time being aware of the needs of others. Like so many in the world, you get caught up in your own little busy-ness and forget to make a call or to hear what folks are saying. That's my challenge.

Daphne: I think it challenges me to reach out more and so I must do that.

Cynthia: I need to listen better. One of the things I need to work on in order to hear the needs of others around me.

Ruby: I'm going to put my worries in his hands. I have a daughter-in-law in Houston who is expecting twins after having two very difficult pregnancies. She's about 5 feet and 38 years old. And I do worry, I just can't help but be very concerned under all the circumstances she's going through. I find myself when I'm praying more and more about this particular incident than all of my other family probably put together and I'm going to let it go, or at least try.

Elise: Well I'm going to, I realize that I need to have the faith that what I need is there. And I need to avail myself of it and make my faith stronger. And in doing so perhaps I can...we don't have Jesus' garment actually to touch but perhaps through our touch we can transfer some of his love or at least help others who are in need of it and perhaps who don't have the feeling that it is there. And I feel the need to reach out to those who are having a very difficult time.

In this excerpt, it is evident that the goal of the *lectio divina* reading practice, like Vicky's wallowing, was to internalize the text in such a way as to bring about some change in the self. Some of the women articulate specific actions that they are feeling urged to do in response to the text, such as Betty's sense that she should go visit her sister. Others have a more generalized sense of a need to be more "in touch" or "connected" to God. For many the text suggested a change in perspective, either in terms of being more attentive to the needs of others or thinking about their own lives differently. For example, Barbara's comment culminates in a feeling of gratefulness that derives from her own reflection on her life and how she has been and can touch others. This comment is different from the majority of the comments in the way that Barbara's perspective seems to change during the *lectio divina* practice. The others seem to articulate a perspective that they *should* cultivate or ways in which they hope to change in light of what they heard in the text. In this way, *lectio divina* as practiced by the Dames and the Divine points to an ideal of subjective change rather than the change itself. The conversation does not revisit the same text the next week and the women did not report whether they have achieved the desired closeness with God and others throughout the next week.

Wallowing so that “God’s word is alive and active in us” at Quinn Temple

The Beth Moore video series that the Quinn Temple group was watching on Wednesdays at noon emphasized many of the same reading and internalization practices that Vicky encouraged in her group and that the Dames and Divine used in their *lectio divina*. The most prominent of these was repetition and memorization since each lesson in the video series began and ended with the recitation of a “five statement pledge of faith,” aimed at the internalization of the series’ content about “believing God.” The five statements are: 1. God is who he says he is. 2. God can do what he says he can do. 3. I am who God says I am. 4. I can do all things in Christ. 5. God’s word is alive and active in me. These five statements are recited while counting them off one hand and then that hand is used to point to oneself and then to point upwards while declaring, “I’m believing God.”²¹² This five statement pledge of faith is similar to the overview statement that Vicky provided in her study of Romans in that it is intended to encompass and facilitate the remembrance of the doctrinal content of each lesson in the series.

The sections of the study that deal with fifth part of the statement, “God’s word is alive and active in me,” encourage practices of internalization that are particularly resonant with the image of wallowing that I have been building. In the 6th installment of the video series, Beth Moore uses the metaphor of breathing to describe how one should be using the Bible in prayer. She says that one should inhale scripture through reading, meditation, and memorization and then exhale it in prayer. By this she means reciting verses or sections from the Bible in the place of prayers that one would individually compose and address

²¹² This five-statement pledge was printed on a bookmark included in the workbook and during the first video session, the participants were directed to fill the five statements of the pledge on their worksheet. Beth Moore, *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith – Member Book*, 9.

towards God. In essence, she is exhorting the women who are watching her study not just to read and meditate on the Bible silently, but also to speak verses aloud. Beth Moore asserts that speaking these verses aloud makes them more powerful and certainly one can see how the vocalization of memorized texts can further cement the memorization and internalization of texts. I submit that Vicky would appreciatively accept that this is what she wants her group to do when she tells them to wallow in the text, even if Beth Moore is much more specific about how to do it. Jamie, the leader of the Quinn Temple study, is even more specific and simple, when she affirms in her own commentary on the video series that in order for “God’s word to be alive and active” in us, we should be memorizing scripture.²¹³

Beth Moore’s video series is also accompanied by a workbook that includes worksheets with blanks to fill in for each video presentation as well as exercises to complete throughout the week. The lessons in the workbook continue the conversational tone of the video series in a daily devotional format, but also include exercises that guide the reader through selections from the Bible and connect these selections to the themes of the video series. The exercises in the workbook also employed the some of the strategies that Vicky used in her study of Romans, especially the “word studies” strategy. Beth Moore’s workbook includes the definitions for key Greek and Hebrew words in the margins of most of the worksheets and incorporates these definitions into many of the exercises.²¹⁴ In addition, Beth Moore mentions in one of the video presentations that the reader is supposed

²¹³ Quinn Temple meeting, December 9, 2009.

²¹⁴ Beth Moore also identifies each word by its Strong’s Concordance number, a concordance that correlates Hebrew and Greek words with their English counterparts in the King James Version of the Bible. Strong’s Concordance was originally published in 1890 and is now readily available in searchable versions online. James Strong, *The New Strong’s Concordance of the Bible: a Popular Edition of the Exhaustive Concordance* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1985). Although Beth Moore uses a variety of different versions of the Bible, she primarily uses the New International Version.

to have read through the fourth chapter of Romans 20 times by the end of the workbook.²¹⁵ The workbook's focus on Romans coincides with both the emphasis on Romans as a key support for evangelical doctrine and the general emphasis on repetition in reading the genre of doctrine.

In the Quinn Temple group, however, in contrast to Vicky's study on Romans, the idealized nature of these kinds of reading strategies was more obvious.²¹⁶ In going over the worksheets attached to each video presentation, Jamie all but ignored the "word studies," commenting on a word for further discussion only once.²¹⁷ Furthermore, the fact that the Quinn Temple participants rarely did the homework in the workbook became a recurring joke throughout the study. The levels of literacy and education among the Quinn Temple participants varied widely, but it is unlikely that difficulty with the material was the primary reason for a lack of compliance with the homework.²¹⁸ I think it is more likely that these women, like the women who attended Vicky's study on Romans, simply had little leisure time to devote to intensive daily study. The reading strategy of "word studies," while encouraged by many leaders and practiced by many lay leaders like Vicky, seems to be experienced more as a rhetorical strategy for these Bible study participants.

²¹⁵ Jamie references this during Quinn Temple meeting, December 2, 2009.

²¹⁶ Vicky chastised the group a few times for her sense that people were not reading Romans throughout the week as she would have hoped, but people did not openly discuss how they did not do the homework in the Breathing Space Wednesday group.

²¹⁷ Quinn Temple meeting, November 18, 2009.

²¹⁸ Jamie told me in our first meeting that she had selected the video series as opposed to a more directly text based study because of struggles with literacy among some of the participants. Quinn Temple meeting, October 7, 2009. I also observed that some older participants had trouble reading because of eyesight problems.

Their reticence to do the homework did not necessarily mean that the Quinn Temple participants were not enthusiastic about the video series more generally.²¹⁹ In the discussions following each video presentation, the Quinn Temple women talked about which parts of the presentation had struck them as particularly significant. Jamie began these discussions by going over the worksheet to make sure everyone had filled in the blanks correctly, stopping often to discuss particular points in more detail. Denise in particular responded positively to the idea of exhaling scripture by speaking it aloud in prayer.

Jamie: *(reading from workbook) With that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, 2 Corinthians 4:13. Pneuma means spirit, but it also means breath. Consider how we can live off the CPR of God as we believe, we inhale his words and as we speak, we exhale his words. Cast the burden upon God and his word, not our abilities to pray. That's pretty powerful, right?*²²⁰

Denise: I was going to say, that really struck me.

Jamie: Yeah, that's pretty powerful that we inhale his words and as we speak, we exhale his words. And then *cast our burdens upon God and not our abilities to pray*. So imagine if we just started operating not in our own abilities but in the abilities of God, right? You know, oftentimes we don't pray because we don't feel like we're capable or qualified. Why did it strike you?

Denise: It struck me because when she was explaining that if you pray...and for me I always kinda thought that if I prayed and I believed. But if I actually pray and speak it with scripture, then again it takes the burden off of me. Like she said, I'm praying this on his words and then he takes the burden. I don't want to say I'm done, but it keeps it from being so heavy on you, because you're supposed to release it. But you release it through his words, not my words.²²¹

²¹⁹ Jamie and Beth Moore were not in complete agreement on at least two points: Jamie often changed the language for God to be more gender neutral, a habit probably picked up during seminary, since the other participants in her group used male language for God. Also, Beth Moore clearly included homosexuality among her examples of sexual sin, but Jamie does not think homosexuality is a sin. Jamie did not express her disagreement with Beth Moore immediately after the video presentation in which homosexuality was included as a sin (Quinn Temple meeting, November 4, 2009) but had taken other opportunities to speak in support of GLBT persons in the church (Quinn Temple meeting, October 28, 2009).

²²⁰ The underlined words were the blanks in the worksheet and Jamie paused to have everyone say the words they had filled in while watching the video presentation. Beth Moore, *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith – Member Book*, 115.

²²¹ Quinn Temple meeting, November 4, 2009.

In her comments, Denise expresses her sense that speaking verses from the Bible as prayer would be helpful and affirms the value of memorizing and internalizing scripture that undergirds the practice Beth Moore has described. Denise even seems to embrace the idea of relinquishing some responsibility or agency to God through the process of internalizing the Bible. I explore the role of agency in struggling with the text and Christian doctrines in the section below, but here it suffices to note Denise's appreciation for Beth Moore's version of "wallowing" in the text.

In her response to this lesson more generally, Jamie expressed her appreciation for Beth Moore's message about the necessity of believing in order to experience significant changes in one's life.

Jamie: Amen. So, no more ineffective believing. That kind of hit me in my chest, I think, a little bit. That was pretty interesting when she said, "No more ineffective believing." You know, you think about it should be enough just to believe, but then you start talking about ineffective believing. That we're not using the power, or *allowing God's word to be alive and active in us.*²²²

Jamie's comment highlights a link between effective internalization of the text and shifts in one's ability to experience religious change, a link that is implicit in all of the practices of internalization I've discussed. Furthermore, Jamie and the Quinn Temple women accepted that the internalization and affirmation of certain doctrines, not only the internalization of the Bible, would lead to lead to personal changes. Guided by the language of Beth Moore's study, their discussions centered on what would change in their lives if they "really" believed.

²²² Quinn Temple meeting, November 4, 2009.

Struggling to change and “Operating in who God calls us to be” at Quinn Temple

Also implicit in the Quinn Temple women’s appreciation of Beth Moore’s message is the recognition that the women do not already experience God’s word as “alive and active” in them, at least to the extent to which Beth Moore is encouraging her viewers to experience it. The reality is that the change that would be evidence of the effective internalization of the text or doctrinal values through wallowing is often an ideal reality rather than regularly experienced by the women in these groups. The women of Quinn Temple and, as I will show, the women of Dames and the Divine and the Wednesday Breathing Space group reach points in when they are reading Christian doctrine when the ideals they are taught and accept do not match up to their experiences. These competing realities and the struggle to reconcile them are frequent topics of discussion in these groups and, as I described at the outset of this chapter, struggling is a major modality of reading that goes hand-in-hand with the practice of wallowing.

In the conversation below, Mrs. Edmond articulates the distance that she (and others, she presumes) experiences between what she should feel religiously and what she actually does feel. This conversation followed the video presentation entitled “Believing that God has been there all along,” in which Beth Moore uses the illustration of the Israelites crossing the Jordan river on dry land to get to Gilgal in the Promised Land.²²³ In this story, the Israelites stop halfway across the river to collect stones to create a memorial on the other side. Beth Moore argues that the halfway point is significant because of that is the point of doubt and indecision and encourages her viewers to hurry on across to get to their personal promised

²²³ Beth Moore is drawing from Joshua 4, but also reads from Exodus 14:12-15 where there was an earlier moment of indecision before crossing the Red Sea to make her point. Beth Moore, Beth Moore, *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith – Member Book*, 141.

lands. Jamie is referring to that moment of fear and uncertainty in the middle of the river in her comment.

Jamie: You know, when anxiety takes over, when angst happens or when [there are] circumstances that are beyond our control, do people know that Jesus operates in our lives? (*pause*) More importantly, whether or not people know, do we know? Do you know, do we know that we are living testimonies of Christ? That our lives, our walk and our talk, our actions, our reactions all speak to who God is in us? And so then you can tell whether or not we believe God, whether or not we're really honestly and truly believing God. Any questions, thoughts, comments...prayer requests...

Mrs. Edmond: I just think that is just so powerful Pastor, what you just said. Because sometimes I think we front. You know, you just strutting all around, "Yeah, *I believe that God is alive in me,*" and on the inside you have all these struggles and worries. The Lord knows that you are not trusting him. But we sound good, we look good, we go good, we hang good. But then we really aren't where we really want to be.²²⁴

Mrs. Edmond parrots part of the five-statement pledge in her comment, as if someone were enthusiastically reciting the pledge. In addition, Mrs. Edmond is picking up on how Jamie's questions point to the possibility of a similar distance between what one should believe and what one actually does believe and confessing that she has found herself in that situation when her interior reality does not match the Christian expectations. At the very least, the gap that opens here shows that when the Quinn Temple women affirm the ideal of believing God and accept the doctrines that they learn, the acceptance does not crowd out the many other realities they experience in their lives. This gap helps us to understand how internalizing a doctrine is not *necessarily* a totalizing activity and opens up the possibility that one can wallow in a text and still affirm accounts of the world that are in conflict with the account in the text.

I observed a further illustration of how the Quinn Temple women struggle to reconcile competing accounts in their discussion about how to respond to the worry and fear that they experience despite their desire to "believe in God." The week following the

²²⁴ Quinn Temple meeting, November 11, 2009.

illustration about getting stuck with uncertainty in the middle of crossing the Jordan, Jamie guided the group through a discussion before beginning the video presentation. She had prompted the group to share a time when they felt particularly remembered by God and the discussion turned to what keeps us from remembering those times and how fear can keep us from believing God. In addition to showing how Mrs. Edmond and Denise struggle to implement the instructions to believe God in spite of their fear, the discussion below shows how these women have different interpretations of what the desired outcome of believing God in these situations might be. In the discussion below, for Denise, the change she is looking for seems to be a sense of peace and calm about her life, which would allow her not to worry about her life. Denise uses the language of submission to God and not relying on her own power. Mrs. Edmond, however, wants to assert that the effect she is looking for is not an erasure of the fear or worry in her life, but rather to be able to find the power move on and act despite her fear.

Jamie: But then what is the risk about though? What makes it become a risk? Because we are fearful of what the outcome is. And so then, you know I'm not a good Bible scholar, but there's a text that says something about that we don't fear because we've been perfected in love. And that God is a God of love not a God of fear. Right? So then if we believe in God's love for us, even when it's something where the outcome could not be favorable, if we believe God to be who God says God is and going to do the things for us that God has promised us, then we don't have to be concerned about the fear. Right? We can just act. You know a lot of things happen, like the whole health care issue now is because people are fearful for their livelihoods, right? People don't want health care for everybody because they are really concerned how that's going to impact them personally. So what does it take for us to not be so concerned about our own personhood, but really just start operating in what God has in store for us?

Denise: For me, it just all goes back to that level of faith. So my dad used to always say when I was little, "If you're going to worry, don't pray. If you're going to pray, don't worry." So for me as a person who's always wantin' to, I don't want to say control, but control, (*Jamie laughs*) it's almost like, well don't pray if you're going to do it. You have to let it go. You ask God should we do this and then he answers, and then you just have to, again, step out there and go, "Okay." And then sometimes you're standing out there, like me now, going, "Okay...(*chuckling*) I'm waiting." But the answer is, "Well, just keep waiting."

Jamie: There's all sorts of things that can happen, that you could do in the waiting time.

Denise: Like, "Stop waiting. Concentrate on my word. Do what I tell you to do cuz I got this. Not you, *I* got this." And then you get that calm. There's days when I'm like, just pray and get over it and do what you're supposed to do. And when it's time, it's time. It's hard, but there are those calming moments, where he reinforces that you're functioning in your stuff, not my stuff.

Mrs. Edmond: And then I think, it's alright with God for us to be fearful. I really do. I mean, fearful of the situation. He knows that we are afraid, but I think the test of faith is to move on in spite of the fear that you have or the risk that you are going to take. You have to know that it's a risk because that's a part of your intellect. But the part of you that-- God knows that you are thinking about it. God knows that you are afraid. God knows that you think it's a risk and how nervous you are about it. But I think the beauty of it is, if you are able to step out and say, "Oh yes, I'm scared to death. I am scared to death. But I'm going to do it because I believe that the Lord is going to be with me." Your belief that the Lord is going to be with you won't stop you from being afraid, because I think that's a mental, human—because we are human too, I think? (*laughter*) And then when my children are having problems with stuff, I can say to them, "Don't worry about it. It's goin' to be okay. It's goin' be okay." But then I think, "Lord, please make it okay." You know? (*laughter*) And so I think that's just all part of the circle of faith. I might be off track on that, but I think he understands.

Jamie: I think God understands, but I was talking to somebody else about fear, so I pulled up all this stuff about fear recently. And so, if you think about it, there are two kinds of fear. Fear of God, right, which is beneficial. Because if you fear God then you start doing stuff that God calls you to do. If you fear God, then you're gonna to operate in God's will and God's way for your life. And the other kind of fear is...what is it called (*looking for the verse*)...the other kind of fear is a detriment to our lives. Because when we're afraid of stuff...like 2 Timothy 1:7 (*reading from notes*) "*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind.*" [*KJV*] *A spirit of fearfulness and timidity does not come from God.* As so, while we are fearful, once we decide to start operating in who it is that God calls us to be, then we are full of power and love and a sound mind.

Mrs. Edmond: And we are not immobilized. I think, when we are immobilized because of that fear, then a lack of trust is evident.²²⁵

In Mrs. Edmond's comments and more clearly in Jamie's last comment, these two women describe a way of maintaining two internal perspectives at once by recognizing the fear that they might feel and speculating that God understands their fear and yet at the same time choosing to "believe" anyway and act in spite of their fear. Jamie also uses language that she uses frequently to talk about the choice people have to make about whether to operate in who God wants them to be or letting the devil work through them. For Jamie, to

²²⁵ Quinn Temple meeting, November 18, 2009.

“operate” in God’s way is to choose to act a certain way instead of waiting for one’s motivations to change. This language of “operating in who God calls us to be” both acknowledges that we are not already who God calls us to be and does not deny that there are other possible ways of seeing the world and operating in it. For Jamie then, choosing to “operate” this way is a way of internalizing Christian ways of thinking and acting in the face of competing realities even within the self.

Denise’s comments, while they dovetail nicely with Mrs. Edmond and Jamie’s sense that one must not let fear and worry immobilize you, emphasize a response of waiting rather than acting in response to fear. Denise’s perspective on the correct response to fear was probably colored by the fact that Denise was looking for a job and doing a lot of waiting for responses. However, in an earlier conversation, Denise also used language more explicitly tied to not acting and submission. After doing well on an exam that she had been worried about and had not prepared for, Denise said that “it builds that he really got this, but [you] have to keep letting it go. I want to do it, but we can’t both drive the car. I know what happens when I try to drive.”²²⁶ The different interpretations that Mrs. Edmond and Denise have about how one should deal with the reality of fear in their lives points to a diversity of opinions within the Christian tradition, since there is support for both of their positions within the tradition and even within Beth Moore’s study itself. For instance, Mrs. Edmond had pointed out how the lesson about inhaling and exhaling scripture contained a contradiction that encouraged both activity on our part and relying on God.²²⁷

²²⁶ Quinn Temple meeting, November 4, 2009.

²²⁷ “It seemed just a little bit contradictory to me, because if she...the whole lesson has been encouraging us to speak what our need is. And so speaking to me is a synonym for praying. And so here she’s saying, don’t depend on your ability to pray or speak, when the whole lesson has been just the opposite. Maybe you aren’t depending on your ability to speak it to bring about the desired

When looking at the these kinds of discussions in the Quinn Temple group more globally, there was agreement that these approaches to the Christian life must be held together even if sometimes one person in particular vocalized one part of the equation alone. The challenge that the Quinn temple women struggled with was how to depend on God and be an agent in your own religious life at the same time. Ultimately, struggling with Christian doctrine for the Quinn temple women signaled their acceptance of the doctrines they studied yet also their acceptance that some of these doctrines could not be easily reconciled with their experiences.

Struggling with Prayer and the Will of God in Dames and the Divine

In the Dames and the Divine's *lectio divina* practice, we can also see an approach to struggling with Christian doctrine as a disposition towards acceptance that does not erase or deny the ways in which these doctrines are difficult or sometimes even impossible to accept for these women. During their study of Mark, Clara selected the passage below for contemplation by the group.

Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you having anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. —Mark 11:23-25 RSV

This is a classic text to struggle with because most Christians have not had the experience of being able to move mountains through prayer. There is also a more basic disconnect that Christians often experience between this text and their own practices of prayer. They are told to ask boldly for things in prayer and that they will receive them, but many Christians

outcome, but it still seems contradictory...to me." Mrs. Edmond, Quinn Temple meeting, November 4, 2009.

would admit to having felt their prayers unanswered at some point. The responses to this text in the course of the *lectio divina* practice spilled over into more of a dialogue rather than just individuals responding in turn to the text. In the excerpt below, Barbara leads off the responses with her own sense of the impossibility of moving mountains.

Barbara: Golly. What struck me was not so much a word as an image: a mountain. You know, that is a solid, huge image to think you could just get it to move you know like that. My thoughts were, “How can I have that kind of faith?” I must have a lot of doubt in me, so maybe doubt is the word. I don’t know. But just that image is what just stood out in my head and it kinda rocked around in there and I’m not comfortable with it.

...

Jerry: It’s trite but the same things [that others have been saying]. Especially forgive, that really strikes a chord because I can’t always do it. No, I don’t always do it (*laughter*)...there you have it...free will.

Janice: You see, Jerry, that’s one of the gifts of being ADD. I could never hold a grudge cuz I can’t remember whatever it was. (*laughter*)

Nancy: Well, forgive certainly. But I think it’s a little disturbing when it says, “[I] tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it.” But the back side of it is that you don’t always get what you ask for in prayer, but you get what you should have, I guess. But that was the other side...

Cynthia: You’re not always praying for the right thing.

Nancy: Yeah that too. We think it’s the right thing, but it’s not necessarily is.

Elise: Well, I’m with Barbara, that bothered me too. Believe. I don’t know that I believe that whatever I ask for--I just don’t have that much faith, I guess. I ask, but I just trust that whatever comes will be what I need. But as far as believing that I get what I ask for, I don’t know about that. And then, forgive, of course, is a big part.

Janice: Does it feel a little bit like a gotcha, that if you ask for the mountain to be put in the sea and it doesn’t happen, [then] ah! You just didn’t believe hard enough?

Elise: Yeah. I have a hard time with that

Barbara: Made me think that I was too doubtful. I couldn’t make that happen.

...

Loretta: I’m with Elise. I have always had a problem with that, “Pray and you’ll get what you want.” I’ve known as a teacher of disabled children, deaf children, I can remember mothers praying, praying, praying for that hearing. I can remember my own mother just praying for other things and fervently believing it. Too many examples in my head of people who have prayed and year after year and nothing happens, nothing happens, nothing happens. So I have a problem with that.

... longer gap...

Brenda: Mine is the mountain that Brenda and Nancy and Elise and all of you have been talking about. I was absolutely obsessed by this verse when I was a teenager, because the mountain was asking something huge, something really huge. And I remember it finally came to me that the key was actually in the imagery right here. And the

answer was, and I wrote it in a poem, “I prayed that the mountain be moved but God moves oceans every day.” Something just as big, something just as heavy. Which said to me what some of you said, the answer that comes is not always the answer that you ask for. It says if you ask for it to be thrown into the sea, it will be thrown into the sea--not necessarily. But he is that powerful and something will move. The ocean does every day. And we miss it.

....

Daphne: I struggle with the matter of prayer all the time, because I’m very conflicted about it. And I’ve about come to the conclusion that if it changes anything, it changes me and how I can view things and how I might deal with things. But in terms of anything outside of myself, I can’t see that prayer is moving mountains or oceans. I wish I could, but so far I have not been able to arrive at that desired destination.

Jerry: Or maybe it’s just our, I won’t speak for you Daphne, maybe it is our definition or our view or vision of what truly is a mountain--maybe we’re the mountain. Like you say it can change us. You reminded me, I guess it was really a prayer I was saying the other night...[After a conflict with my sister about who should drive her father home from Christmas]...I just said, and what I’m doing is praying, but I’m articulating it. I even looked heavenward. I said, “I don’t know how to behave. I don’t know what to do, because this makes me so anxious, but when I air that it makes it worse, because she’s so sensitive. I don’t know what to do. What should I do? How should I behave?” ...And then all of a sudden, I physically felt, and this has happened to me before, I physically felt this weight being lifted off my shoulders because the answer came to me. And I remember thinking, “My prayer is being answered. (*knocking on the table*) I have the answer!” And I looked at [my husband] and I said, “I can’t change her. This is the way it is going to be for the rest of our lives. And I quoted you my dear Barbara. I said, “It’s just like Barbara told me one time. She just patted me and said, ‘You can’t control everything.’” And that’s what I realized I was trying to do. And I said to [my husband], “All I can do is tell [my sister] what the reality is going to be and help come to a solution. And that’s what we’re going to do, we figured it out. We figured out that my dad could *fly* home after Christmas and make it be half of roundtrip ticket to then maybe go back at Easter...So that’s been eating at me. I’m glad you brought that up, because that probably isn’t the kind of prayer that God had in mind, but that’s how it sometimes comes to me.

Elise: But it changed your perspective. That’s just what Daphne said: it may not change anything else but it changes you.

Jerry: My mountain moved.²²⁸

Starting out the discussion, Barbara expresses her feeling that she cannot measure up to what the text requires. The other women seem to feel a similar gap between their experience and the text and the discussion turns to struggling with whether or not they should

²²⁸ Dames and the Divine meeting, November 18, 2009. Although a conversation emerged around prayer, the women are ostensibly still sharing their responses to the text in turn. Therefore, I have redacted out a few comments in this excerpt that refer to the verses about forgiveness.

be measuring up, in other word whether the text actually requires such radical faith. Loretta's comment highlights the fact that many people pray and experience unanswered prayers, pointing to the idea that these women would not be alone in finding this text difficult. The women in this conversation also talk about reasons for this disconnect, such as they might be asking for the wrong thing or the perhaps only what is truly needed is given. Yet they also entertain the idea that the text is right and they need to conform themselves to the text, as Barbara's original comment asking how she can have that kind of faith suggests. Throughout the conversation, these women both affirm that truly internalizing the viewpoint of the text could bring about the personal change that the text requires but also affirm their experiences that diverge from the text, for instance the experience of not having one's prayers unanswered.

Brenda has a creative response to reconciling this verse that in some ways sidesteps the issue, by saying God is powerful because God moves the ocean everyday. This answer does not necessarily solve the problem of why answers to prayer are not more like moved mountains, in other words, like experiencing the miraculous movement of things that do not move in nature. Daphne has an interesting response as well, in which she accepts that she does not experience prayer in terms of external effects, but she also gives a small nod that she should experience it that way. Finally, Jerry tells story about how her mountain moved, her perspective changed on what seemed to be an implacable conflict between her and her sister. In some ways, this story affirms Daphne's interpretation in which prayer brought about a change in herself and allowed her to accept her sister's immobility. The solutions that Brenda, Daphne, and Jerry have devised allow them to accept the promise that Jesus makes in the text as true and acknowledge the difficulty in seeing how that promise is fulfilled in

their own experience. In this excerpt, struggling with the text describes the approach to the text that attempts to maintain these disparate perspectives at once.

In the Dames and the Divine group, however, we also see how struggling with a text or doctrine can veer into more open resistance and sometimes even rejection when the text under discussion does not have the authority that is attached to the Bible. In these situations, “struggling” with a text is more accurately described as a disposition that tries to find reasons *not* to reject a text, even in the face of strong personal resistance, because of the text’s standing in the tradition.

For instance, while reading *The Will of God* the Dames were very resistant to Leslie Weatherhead’s theological concepts, even though the text would fit into the category of “questioning Christian spirituality” that describes the majority of the books that the Dames read. This was surprising because most of the women in the Dames proudly identified as liberal Christians and would not have been ruffled by the demythologizing stance Weatherhead takes in his other writings, denying the Virgin Birth for example. However, the five sermons that are contained in the volume were originally delivered and published after Weatherhead’s church, City Temple in London, was destroyed by bombing during WWII and they communicate a theological response to the devastation many experienced during the war. Thus, although Weatherhead’s work represents a radically liberal strain of Protestant thought, the book was written at somewhat of an historical remove from the women in the group.

There were several objections raised to the book, but the strong resistance arose in the second discussion of the book in objection to an example in the text that seemed to them to support an older perspective on gender roles. In discussing how the will of God for our lives

can be diverted by circumstance but never thwarted completely, Weatherhead uses the example of a woman who does not marry and does not have children, but is still able to fulfill God's will for her life through caring for others. Linda, who in her fifties is on the younger end of the group, related how she had started reading this book with another group when she was younger, and when she and her group came to this example, they stopped reading the book completely. The rest of the women murmured their agreement and Barbara, who is on the older end of the group in her 70s, seconded that this example was objectionable.

Barbara: "Well, as I was reading it I wanted to close it up at that point too. I did not like the sentence, '*Now it is not the intentional will of God that she should remain unmarried, the divine intention surely is that every woman should have a home and a husband and babies.*'"²²⁹

Although all of the women in the group had been married and had children themselves, they unanimously agreed that the "divine intention" for every woman is not first and foremost to have children.

The group was reluctant to reject the book completely on this demerit alone, especially since the book had been recommended by a member of the group. Yet Daphne, who had recommended it, was away for most of the discussion of the book and so the book was left without defenders. During the third week out of five in which this book was discussed, the resistance to Weatherhead's text was palpable and towards the end of the discussion Kathleen asked the group "Why is it that it seems like we are taking more exception than to heart the communication of the book?"²³⁰ The general sense of the conversation was that the book was too "dated," but Elaine was the most vocal opponent of the text and also voiced a concern with the doctrinal content of the text.

²²⁹ Dames and the Divine meeting, September 9, 2009.

²³⁰ Dames and the Divine meeting, September 16, 2009. The conversation quoted in the rest of this section refers to this meeting.

Elaine: We all know of books from 70 years ago too that we love. Great lyrical writing or whatever, so I don't think it's just the times, I think it's a lot the message. Really when you start talking about this woman who lost her husband and surely God's way was that she was going to be married and have him around and blah blah blah. I keep saying well, life is just a journey. And he keeps harking back to there's this path and then you get deviated from it and that's the quote evil, but it's going to get you back but it's still got the path and that drives me nuts.

Elise: Well, I think the word evil I think bothers a lot of us though...

Elaine: (*interrupting*) Bad things, whatever, he still got the path. And I think, no, it's just all part of the mush.

Linda: Live the life that God has given you, not the one you think you oughtta have.

Elaine: He kinda gets locked into that there kind of is...something, and you just got diverted. I just keep coming back to that stream.

Elise: That makes it easier to define evil, if you've got a path like this, then if you...

Elaine: (*interrupting*) But I don't buy...see I don't buy into that.

Elise: No, I think that's one of the problems...

Elaine: (*overlapping*) I think that's the crux of the problem. I wanna give you mine (*gesturing to Linda*) so you can give...(*LAUGHTER*)

Linda: I'll send it to Phoenix [to my friend from my old group].

Deborah: Maybe we can have a book-burning (*laughter*)

Linda: Well, I want Daphne to come back and tell us why she liked it.

While it is clear that Elaine flat out rejects the book, the other women in the group seem to agree with her but also want to pinpoint the part of the book that is objectionable so that they might also find something useful in the book. Kathleen's question alone affirms that she wishes she could find something to take "to heart." Later on in the same discussion, the other women in the group named parts of the text that they liked when they could, as Betty does when she tells about how her own life connected to the example of the woman who had been widowed by war. Weatherhead encourages this imaginary woman not to despair, to take up life bravely and God's ultimate will will be done. He says that the stream of married life is certainly blocked but argues that her personality can be fulfilled in other ways. Betty told the group how she had felt when she had been unexpectedly divorced and alone and how God had led her through that time of learning to be independent.²³¹

²³¹ Betty's story is also an example of finding resonance with the personal examples in a text that I discuss in chapter one, even though the example in the text is not told from a first-person perspective

Betty: ...This was to be, I was to be in Denver, I was to be doin' this, I was to be doin' that and suddenly it's not that path. That's why the line in here, you can't know the end from the beginning, and I do know what helped me which, course he talks about, you can't know it all, see if you can find the next step. The next step, Michael was president of [the school where I eventually became principal], I was called by his secretary, Marcia, and he had heard this had happened in my life and he was coming into Denver to visit his sister or some relative and he wanted to know if I could meet him at the airport, just to visit with him. And he offered me a job back at [the school] in Atlanta, but didn't force me into it, you know. So here, is an opening, here is a step, not what I planned out but a step and the way it went from there, I never would have known [a significant mentor I met later in my life]...But I didn't do it all at once, I mean it was impossible to do it all at once. You just have to do it one day at a time. I mean, I wouldn't be as involved in [my alma mater] as I would have been if I had been out in Colorado. I still go back to Colorado to enjoy the mountains. See I've retained the good out of it, but dropped some of the other stuff. But that's a long story.

Deborah: But I did like on what he says on page 46, where he said, and this was in last week's [chapter], "... *'I have overcome the world.'* And if we can only trust where we cannot see, walking in the light we have." In other words, what little light we might have. "...which is very much like hanging on in the dark..." I sort of like that image, because that was what you were doing Betty, walking in the little bit of light that you could see. But hanging on in the dark.

Betty's story shows that she was able to find something in the text that matched her own experience.²³² Furthermore, Deborah reads a quotation that encapsulates the difficulty in discerning the will of God that is at the heart of Weatherhead's message in the text. When Daphne returned she said that she felt the book was useful for those who were going through hard times.²³³

(i.e. it is not Leslie Weatherhead's own life story but a sermon example that she responds to). The way that her interpretation of her life deviates from Weatherhead's interpretation of the woman who had lost her husband is a reminder that the moments of symmetry between narratives does not mean that the "whole" of the narratives turn out the same, in fact quite the opposite.

²³² This is also a good example of the interpretive practice of finding resonance that I discussed in chapter one. Here Betty finds a point of contact with the text in which a point in her life is analogous to the example in the text, however Betty's story does not perfectly line up with the example in the text or even Weatherhead's doctrinal argument.

²³³ Daphne also told me in her interview that when she had first begun questioning traditional Christianity, she had read *The Christian Agnostic* in which Weatherhead argues against Christianity as a theological system in favor of a model of Christian discipleship based on experience. She told me that these ideas had been particularly formative for her own religious perspective. Leslie D.

Daphne: Well I really think that the wonder of this book is that it's so foundational. I think in many ways through all the things we've learned in life and studied that we've come far beyond this, but there are times in one's life when it can be extremely valuable. And so I think it's a good thing, a good book to keep in mind for people in crisis

In this comment, Daphne did say that perhaps they had all advanced beyond Weatherhead's theology, but she also stood by her recommendation. Ultimately, while there was never a groundswell of support for the book in the group's discussions, the Dames and the Divine group did their best to find ways of valuing the message of this text that is part of their theological tradition. Their struggle with this text exemplifies how there are times that one can both reject and accept a book's message at the same time.

Struggling with the Here and Now as opposed to the Future Promise at Breathing Space

Finally, I return to the Wednesday Breathing Space group, but the examples of struggling with the text were largely absent from Vicky's study on Romans. This is primarily because the teacher-focused format that she used did not leave much time for discussion in the first place. Yet I also suspect that the tone of Vicky's presentation of Romans as a text that if one wallows in enough will change your life implied that disagreement with the text was impossible or wrong. It was certainly permissible to discuss how the text was difficult to understand and questions that came up during the study were usually of this nature. Nonetheless, the Wednesday Breathing Space group did openly struggle with the text they read during the previous semester. This book, *God is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* by John Piper, as not part of the biblical canon, did not carry the same authority that the book of Romans does. Still, John Piper is one of the most prolific and well-respected contemporary evangelical authors and his works

Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965). Interview with Daphne, May 13, 2010.

do carry a lot of authority within the tradition of which the Breathing Space groups were a part.

Therefore, there is some evidence that group leaders have a strong role to play in signaling to the rest of the group whether or not it is okay to struggle with a text. In this earlier configuration of the Wednesday Breathing Space group, the group met together first and then broke into two separate groups led by different leaders to read the same book. The second time I attended the meeting, the groups stayed together in one large group and it became clear that the discussions in these two groups had been proceeding very differently.²³⁴ Tanya, who was leading the discussion for the whole group, highlighted a section of Piper's text where she felt that he did not emphasize enough that we are not going to get this pleasure in God on this earth. This was a recurring critique and struggle with Piper's argument, because the women in Tanya's group did not feel like this all-consuming pleasure in God was an ideal that they did not experience all of the time. Yet, if the promise of this pleasure in God was only to be fully realized in an afterlife, then there was space in Piper's vision of the Christian life for periods of being disappointed with God. Another woman, Kathy, agreed and said it would be more acceptable to her if he had said *if* instead of *when*. Mary said that she struggled with it because she didn't believe that there would never be moments that Jesus was frustrating because we can't understand everything. She went on to say that in this world of sin, we can glory and delight in God but God can also be frustrating. At this point in the conversation, the woman who had been leading the other group, Tiffany, chimed in and said that in her group they had been talking about how we get

²³⁴ All of the discussions about John Piper's book occurred before I started recording in this group and therefore the following discussions are described from notes taken during the discussion and expanded after the meeting. This discussion is from Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, October 28, 2009.

caught up on the words he's using and not looking at the bigger picture of what he is trying to say. In other words, she gently but firmly suggested that they were missing the point. Tanya affirmed that it was possible to get caught up in the details, but that it was still important be clear on what you believe.

The rest of the discussion was more focused on finding the useful parts of the chapter, but after the discussion was over, Helen came up to Tanya to say she was glad that Tanya had said that she was having trouble with the book because she had been having trouble with it too. From this interaction, the clash of interpretive approaches in the preceding discussion on Piper, and a comment from Helen in a later discussion that no one had said anything negative about the book in her group, I gathered that open disagreement or struggling with Piper's text had not been part of the discussion in Tiffany and Helen's group.²³⁵ Furthermore, Helen's comment to Tanya suggests that she had not felt able to be open about her difficulties in her group. Tanya's response to Helen, that she really needs to do a Bible focused study because she likes to pick things apart and debate theological points, dismissed the difference in the two leaders' approaches to discussion as if it were a difference in personality. The difference might also have its roots in the fact that Tanya was working on a seminary degree and was on staff at the church and she might have therefore felt more secure in questioning the doctrines in Piper's book. In addition, Tiffany had been the one who had suggested the book for the group to read and might have felt that she needed to defend her recommendation. In either case, it was clear that the leader of each group had set the tone for the discussions and that Tanya's own disagreement with the text had opened up space for others to voice their struggles with Piper's book.

²³⁵ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, November 11, 2009.

While attending the group that Tanya led, however, I observed many instances of struggling with Piper's text in which the group both voiced both the ways in which they disagreed with his arguments and how there were elements that they found helpful in the text. The points of divergence that the women articulated from the vision of the Christian life that Piper describes in his book did not center primarily on points of doctrine, since, as I mentioned, Piper is an "orthodox" evangelical writer whose theological points are recognized as sound. Rather, the points of divergence centered on where the women's experiences did not match up with the ideals of Christian behavior and feelings.²³⁶ Several conversations also highlighted struggles with experiencing personal changes in one's ability to have confidence in God's promises and to stop worrying, as well as with struggles with unanswered prayers and what to ask for in prayer.²³⁷ The option of reading Piper's book as if he were describing the perfection of the Christian life in heaven or upon Jesus' second coming was also raised again. This strategy of reading, like so many of the instances of struggling that I observed in these groups, maintains a position of acceptance or affirmation towards the attitudes that the women perceive they should be developing while articulating the ways in which the realities of their experiences diverge from these ideals.

Reading Religious Tradition and the Feminist Problem of Agency

By now it is clear from my descriptions of how these women struggled with the religious texts in which they were encouraged to wallow that struggling with a text does not necessarily diminish its authority. To say that wallowing is the ideal and struggling is the reality of these women's reading practices does not mean that these women reject the ideal of internalizing these texts. To say that wallowing represents an ideal does not indicate that the

²³⁶ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, November 11, 2009.

²³⁷ Breathing Space Wednesday meetings, October 21, 2009; November 4, 2009; November 18, 2009.

ideal is never realized or is necessarily a false representation of reality for these women. Rather, the practice of struggling with a text, as I am using this term, encompasses within it the disposition to fully accept the perspective of the text but also an acknowledgement that there are competing perspectives that cannot be ignored. Sometimes this tension between the reality in the text and the realities as these women experience them is a sign for the women that they need to bring their lives more into agreement with the text. However, as we saw in the Breathing Space women's difficulty with a description of the Christian life that suggested perfection that they did not experience, the women are quick to point out where doctrines and textual interpretations do not create space for the competing perspectives they experience.

Additionally, it is clear that struggling, defined as a strategy of engaging doctrinal texts and concepts, cannot easily be classified as an autonomous or heteronomous relationship between oneself and the text. Even if we understood these women to be both submitting themselves to the text in a kind of heteronomy when wallowing and retaining their autonomy in the ways that they struggle with the texts, the both-and nature of struggling with a text does not fit into the autonomy/heteronomy dichotomy. Elizabeth Bucar's concept of "dianomy" moves in the direction that what I have tried to describe as the both-and nature of reading religious doctrine in these groups.²³⁸ Her coinage of the term is aimed at holding together the autonomy and heteronomy that is present in women's religious subjectivity without too easily resolving the tension between these two poles of the dichotomy. Bucar argues that the interaction between the two "is sometimes manifested as an ongoing tension between autonomy and heteronomy, or better yet, as a negotiation of multiple heteronomous

²³⁸ Elizabeth Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011). Also Elizabeth Bucar, "Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women's Moral Agency as Creative Conformity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 3 (2010): 662-686.

influences at the individual level.”²³⁹ However, an account of the self that acknowledges that we are multiply constituted by many social structures would more aptly describe how women can engage and sometimes accept competing realities at once and would make it possible to dispense with the dichotomy of autonomy and heteronomy in descriptions of religious women’s experience.

In this last section of this chapter, I want to show how the conclusions I have drawn about these women’s relationships to doctrinal texts fit into a hermeneutic account of the self that acknowledges that individuals stand in multiple perspectival horizons like the account that Linda Martin Alcoff develops in *Visible Identities*. In *Visible Identities*, Alcoff endeavors to articulate in detail an account of the self in which “raced and sexed identities can be compatible with a plausible concept of autonomy and agency.”²⁴⁰ She constructs an account of the phenomenological-hermeneutic self in which the self does not have mastery over its knowledge by virtue of being situated in a social-historical horizon, but neither does the horizon or the social identity have complete determining power over the self. Alcoff quotes Gadamer’s definition of the interpretive horizon as “the range of vision that can be seen from a particular vantage point” and the condition in which vision occurs.²⁴¹ Alcoff uses Gadamer’s image of an interpretive horizon to argue that no social horizon is ever closed or completely fixed since it moves as the subject moves through time and space, remaining open to the future and fundamentally dynamic. To further make the point that the self is deeply constituted by its social contexts, Alcoff draws on George Herbert Mead’s account in which “the subject is born into a perspective that involves general, shared meanings which,

²³⁹ Elizabeth Bucar, “Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women’s Moral Agency as Creative Conformity,” 677.

²⁴⁰ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 87.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 95.

because they are intersubjectively shared, have obtained objective status, or in other words have been confirmed.”²⁴²

The the need to extend Alcoff’s account of the socially situated self from raced and sexed identities to include religiously derived identities is one of the foundational arguments I made in the introduction to this project. Despite this omission, her account becomes particularly useful to explain the confusing nature of struggling with a text when she makes the further argument that this hermeneutic account of the self must include a “pluritopic” hermeneutics. The term “pluritopic” is taken from postcolonial critiques of the Western tradition of hermeneutics that argue that Western hermeneutics has ignored power relations between and within cultures as if Western tradition were “a single coherent tradition that is dynamic through history but unchallenged by alternative horizons competing in a given space or time frame.”²⁴³ Alcoff agrees with these postcolonialist scholars that in our contemporary reality the horizons that comprise any group or individual identity are heterogenous and multiple.

Her reflections on this reality are astute when placed next to the practices of struggling with a text I have just described. She asserts that “the incoherences are intense enough to produce their own problems, but it is an advantage to have contrasting assumptions from which to generate dialogue and in some cases repudiations of aspects of cultural knowledge one has grown up with.”²⁴⁴ Later, Alcoff elaborates by saying that “multiple others are constitutive aspects of our interpretive horizon, offering alternative and in some cases competing background assumptions and perceptual practices.”²⁴⁵ Certainly,

²⁴² Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 117.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 125.

the language of struggling with an idea or doctrine in a text that we saw in these groups can be understood to derive from this reality of competing perspectives that are equally foundational for a woman's understanding of the world. Alcoff's account of multiple others in the social foundation of the self explains how the women in the groups I have described here might seem to resist or even reject aspects of what they read even while they affirm other aspects of the texts and of their religious traditions as a whole.

Alcoff intends this pluritopic emendation of the hermeneutic account of the self as an answer to the fear that Gadamer's vision of tradition is "mindless repetition" and that the social-perspectival horizon that shapes the individual is totalizing and ultimately provides no grounds for critique.²⁴⁶ Feminists have been particularly mistrustful of tradition and have agreed with the critiques of tradition in which "the standpoint of tradition offers a distorted and oppressive perspective (Habermas), and dialogue with this tradition, if it is characterized by good will and the appropriation of the tradition, appears to annihilate differences in experience, knowledge, and social and political interests (Derrida)."²⁴⁷ Yet, Alcoff's hermeneutic account of the self explains how subjectivity can be socially constructed without requiring that social foundation to limit the individual's ability to see other realities.

Therefore, I offer the account of socially-constituted selves who are constituted by multiple social perspectives as an answer to possible feminist fears about reading practices that aim at internalization of a traditional text's perspective. The feminist concerns here revolve around the image of women swallowing whatever the tradition hands them in a

²⁴⁶ Linda Martin Alcoff, "Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology", 254.

²⁴⁷ Susan-Judith Hoffman, "Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics and Feminist Projects," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 85. See also Lorraine Code, "Introduction: Why Feminists Do Not Read Gadamer" and Susan Hekman, "The Ontology of Change: Gadamer and Feminism" in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*.

“mindless repetition.” This vision imagines that once the women allow their subjectivities to be shaped by the tradition, they are caught and have no way to wriggle themselves towards alternative visions of reality. The practice of wallowing in the text, especially as Vicky in her study on Romans and Beth Moore in her video series encourage it, might seem to exemplify the image of a religious woman accepting whatever she is taught uncritically. Nonetheless, in the groups that I attended, wallowing and struggling were two practices that appeared together almost like two sides of the same coin. If the possibility of struggling with the text is always present, even as wallowing is upheld as an ideal that is sometimes realized, there is always the possibility for critique and the fears of some feminists about the totalizing perspective of tradition can be allayed.

In fact, if we take the account of the self drawn from pluritopic hermeneutics seriously, then it becomes clear that the fear of religious traditions as totalizing horizons of knowledge also assumes an understanding of tradition that is monolithic without internal plurality and the possibility for debate. Mrs. Edmond and Denise’s differences of opinion about the right way to respond to fear in the Christian life is only a glimmer of an example of the much larger diversities within the Christian tradition. Furthermore, the fear of religious tradition as totalizing also depends on a dichotomous understanding of the relationship between the self and the other in which the winner takes all and one is either given over to the authority of the text or one rejects it. In this view of the self, there is no place for struggling with a text, the kind of relationship I have described in which one both gives oneself over to the perspective of the text and maintains one’s footing in perspectival horizons that represent competing realities. This pluritopic-hermeneutic account of identity, although concerned with affirming the social foundations of the self without foreclosing

conceptual grounds for agency and avoiding falling on either extreme of a purely autonomous or purely heteronomous selfhood, also points to the fundamental multiplicity of engagements at the core of the self.

The multiplicity within the self and within the religious tradition (as represented by the diversity of perspectives among the women in the group itself) brings us to the question of how to map the effects of these collective practices of religious reading. If the desired effect of *wallowing* in the text is conforming to the perspectives of the text, as the women themselves intend, whose agency is effective or thwarted in the attempt? If the texts are representatives of religious traditions, do they stand in for divine agency, institutional agency, or even the agency of individual leaders? The doctrinal texts that were read in these groups were treated as having different authority depending on the author of the text. In the case of the biblical texts, the author was either God or God through the religious tradition and the authors of the non-biblical texts were given their authority by the religious tradition (for example, John Piper is considered a trustworthy author by the religious tradition). So does the author have agency through the text or is the religious tradition acting through the authors? Is there a way in which bringing the perspectives of individual women in line with the doctrinal positions of religious tradition would be the result of Beth Moore's teaching through her video lectures and materials or Vicky's presentations of the book of Romans? In that case, does the religious tradition have less of a controlling influence in the Dames and the Divine group in which there is no defined leader? Furthermore, how should we trace the sources of the competing perspectives that turn *wallowing* in the text into *struggling* with the text? Jamie could be read as subtly providing a competing perspective to Beth Moore's when she passes over Beth Moore's emphasis on word studies, by which Jamie is affirming

the fact that a high degree of literacy is not necessary for “believing God.” Whose agency is interposed when women recognize that they do experience fear, are not consumed in with enjoying the glory of God, or that they do not experience mountains being thrown into the sea? The articulation of these competing perspectives is the action of the individual women who attend the groups, but the horizons that nurture and support these perspectives such that they are strong enough to be sometimes irreconcilable with religious perspectives are surely rooted in multiple social spheres outside of religious traditions.

Given this multiplicity of actors at play in reading doctrinal texts, here the fact that *wallowing* and *struggling* are reading practices collectively enacted in the social space of the group comes into sharper focus. As a result, I return to Linda Zerilli’s reading of Arendt and the implication of non-sovereignty that attends all actions within plurality. For Arendt, the condition of plurality “means that one acts into an ‘already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions’ and consequently that ‘action almost never achieves its purpose.’”²⁴⁸ Therefore, even if the actors in the social space of religious reading groups were restricted to the women themselves who were present, their individual interpretive acts would escape their control and make the possibility of wallowing in a text without also struggling with it difficult. The reality is that there are multiple actors within the practice of religious reading and attaching the effects of religious reading to any one of these actors as the cause is perhaps a senseless exercise. The elision of this multiplicity in attempts to locate religious women’s agency suggests that the concern to trace the effects of action back to its cause is really a concern that the other might be in control of the subject. Yet none of us are sovereign in our actions. When we act within the

²⁴⁸ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 13. Zerilli is quoting from Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 7, 184.

world in which there are multiple others, as Arendt reminds us, “we encounter others who, too, act and take up the effects of our action in ways that we can never predict or control with certainty.”²⁴⁹

Alcoff’s account of the self multiply-situated in social-historical horizons and Zerilli’s reminder of the plurality into which the individual acts create space for the possibility of not just balancing autonomy and heteronomy in our understanding of the subject, but also create space for an understanding of the subject that is always engaged with multiple others. In order for feminists to describe religious women’s agency without falling into the extremes of resistance or submission, we must internalize an account of the self that contains the possibility of multiple actors shaping the outcomes of religious practice and the constructions of religious perspectives. As I have been arguing using Alcoff and Zerilli, what such an account emphasizes is that the other is not necessarily fundamentally a threat to the self and furthermore that the focus on resistance or submission as the primary modalities of agency is driven by a concern to locate the effects of our actions rather than to understand religious subjectivity. In other words, the need to evaluate and decide whether religious women’s actions are resistance or submission operates on a model of action that supposes that our social actions are simple causes to simple effects. The strategies of wallowing in and struggling with the text that I describe in this chapter are one kind of evidence for how sometimes individuals and the discursive traditions in which they are situated might be too multiple to parse which causes are linked to which effects. I will continue to explore the modalities of agency that the autonomy/heteronomy dichotomy cannot encompass in the next chapter, where I discuss the practicing of imagining oneself in the text and ultimately the

²⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52; quoted in Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 14.

playfulness that can be part of religious reading, as I continue to ask how Protestant women's reading practices expand the models of the relationship between self and other operating in feminist scholarship.

Chapter Three: Playful, Imaginative Variations of the Self Otherwise in the Text

In the Mysterion group's discussion about Mark chapter six, the women worked at imagining the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and the scene of Jesus walking on the water. The women speculated on the details that are not given in the biblical narrative, especially the mechanics of the miracle of feeding five thousand people with twelve fish and twelve loaves of bread. Did he actually multiply the amount of food or could he have miraculously made the tiniest morsel of food fill everyone's stomach? Christina, the discussion leader, continued the imaginative mode of the conversation by filling in the seeming lack of response by the crowd to this miracle.

Christina: What I love about that is that y'all want to know how did you do that, but we don't get anything about the crowd being amazed. They're just like, "Thanks, that's great!"

Kelly: Maybe they didn't know how much he started with.

SLK: Also it does say that immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on to the other side. So maybe they cut out before...

Christina: (*in the voice of the disciples and Jesus making a hasty exit*) "Cut and run! Quick, run away!" (*laughter*)

Morgan: "Good, we were trying to get some privacy. You stay here and eat!" (*laughter*)

The suggestions about why the crowd did not express amazement at Jesus's miracle led to playfully imagining Jesus and his disciples using the feeding as a way to escape the crowd.

The playful tone of the conversation continued as the group moved to discuss the scene in the narrative that immediately follows the feeding miracle.

Christina: The next section is Jesus walking on the water. Want to talk about Jesus walking on the water?

Tara: (*whispering*) How did he do it?? (*chuckles of laughter*)

Christina: I love that in verse 48 he sees that they're having a hard time with the wind and he gets up and walks on the sea but he intends to pass them by. What was he doing?? Rubbernecking? What is going on?

Sarah: I just pictured him on the shore, seeing that they are having a hard time and he's like, "No way I'm riding on that boat. I'm going to get there faster if I just walk."

SLK: It's weird that he sends them in the boat and stays behind in some ways...though it says to pray.

Laura: He's always trying to teach the lesson. I feel like he left them out there knowing that they were going to have some problems.

Christina: (*joking*) He's like, "This would be a great opportunity for them to learn about walking on water."

SLK: Or it's like he's having a stroll on the water.

Laura: That line is so weird.²⁵⁰

In this section of the discussion, the women continued playfully imagining the scene and puzzling over the description in the text of Jesus intending to pass by his disciples in the boat.

The discussion centers on why Jesus would be walking on the water in this way and imagines that his motivation for doing so was so that his disciples would learn something or simply that he did not want to be in the wave tossed boat.

Similarly, the women in the Breathing Space group that met on Thursdays imaginatively entered the scene in Exodus when Pharaoh and the Egyptian army are chasing after the fleeing Israelites. The puzzling aspect in this narrative was an inconsistency between an earlier passage in which the fifth plague was supposed to have killed all of the Egyptian livestock, including the horses, and this passage where Pharaoh pursues the Israelites with more than 600 hundred horses and chariots.

Ellie: I just think it's interesting that Pharaoh has horses again, because the livestock got killed earlier in the chapter. I wonder how much time went by and how they all of the sudden had new horses that were strong, and ready for what he thought was a war.

Andrea: Oh right, that's a good question! (*laughter*)

Monica: I just imagined that enough time had gone by that he had purchased... because they *were* decimated and all of sudden to be ready for war.

Andrea: Didn't they run off with horses or livestock too?

Elizabeth: Egypt was one of the most powerful cultures in the known world at that point, so he could have just gone and gotten more. But that was cavalry versus livestock. We would define that differently, I don't know...

Ellie: I think it said somewhere specifically horses, earlier.

Nicole: You're talking about when the hail came?

Monica: Yeah, everything that was out in the fields was destroyed. If you didn't bring it in, you were out of luck. (*chuckling*) If you leave your bike out in the rain, it's got rust.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Mysterion meeting, December 1, 2009.

In the lack of indications in the narrative about how much time had passed between the plagues and the Israelites leaving Egypt, Ellie imagines the possibility that these things did not happen immediately one after the other as they appear in the text. Monica, the leader of the group, encourages this suggestion and imagines further that Pharaoh had the wealth and power to just purchase more horses. Moments of imaginative entry like these into what happened in the stories they were reading and the especially into the motivations of the characters in the text occur frequently in both the Mysterion and Thursday Breathing Space discussions. In these discussions, the women use a number of phrases like “I wonder,” “I picture,” “I imagine,” in order to signal that they are placing themselves in the narratives they read and, as Christina, Morgan, and Sarah’s comments above illustrate, they often take on the voices or perspectives of the characters in the narratives as part of their discussions.

This similarity between the reading practices of these two groups is notable because the Thursday Breathing Space group is part of an evangelical church and the Mysterion group is part of a liberal-leaning mainline Protestant church. These groups, situated in opposite ends of the continuum of liberal and conservative strands of Christianity in the U.S., would represent themselves as differing in their approaches to reading the Bible and yet the reading practices in these groups shared the most features across the diverse groups I studied. I argue in this chapter, therefore, that the similarity in the Breathing Space Thursday and Mysterion groups’ reading practices stems from the fact that both groups are reading the genre of biblical narrative. The genre of narrative invites practices of reading in which readers engage their imagination in order to enter the possible worlds and possible

²⁵¹ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 11, 2010. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was not present for this group’s discussions and so my own participation will only be visible in the Mysterion transcripts in this chapter.

subjectivities presented in the text. As the ubiquitous laughter in the vignettes above suggests, the women in these two groups seem to be playing with the possibilities produced by their collective imaginative engagements with the world of the text.

Furthermore, I argue in this chapter that in the practice of imagining oneself in the world of the text the women in these groups exercise a playful modality of agency that is not fundamentally aimed at producing effects. In other words, imagining oneself in the text is unlike the practice of wallowing in the text where the women were hoping that repetitive reading of the text would produce the effect of conforming their perspectives to those in the text. Likewise, imagining oneself in the perspectives of one of the characters in the text is not aimed at discerning the resonances between this character's life story in order to narrate one's own religious life story. The women in the *Mysterion* and *Breathing Space Thursday* groups do read these biblical narratives with the intent to find the religious significance in these narratives, but the use of the imagination in order to enter into the text has the result that any religious significance that is found is an indirect effect of the reading practice. As the women imaginatively enter the world of the text, they set aside their intent to shape their own subjectivities or to have their subjectivities be shaped by the text. In essence, when they imagine themselves in the world of the text, they are not serious and not playing for keeps, so the subjectivities picked up in this world can easily be put down again at the end of the discussion.

Paul Ricoeur's writings on the ability of narrative to open up a secondary world that is distinct from the "real" world of the reader provide a description of the "imaginary" world that these groups of women pass through during their reading practices. Ricoeur argues that the subjectivity of the reader undergoes "imaginative variations" by entering into the

subjectivities offered by the text.²⁵² At the end of this chapter, I argue that “imaginative variations” in subjectivity is a more useful framework in which to understand the relationship between Protestant women readers and the characters in the biblical narratives than is the term “identification.” Like “recognition,” “identification” is a term that has a variety of everyday and analytical valences, especially in scholarly work on readers.²⁵³ The term “identification” suggests a process of finding sameness, either by finding experiences and perspectives like one’s own in the text or by being shaped into the subjectivities in the text so that the reader becomes identical to the characters in the text.²⁵⁴ In contrast, the process of relating to characters in the text by imaginative entering into possible subjectivities emphasizes the distinction between the “real” subjectivity of the reader and the “imaginary” subjectivities of the characters. The imaginative component of reading escapes the logic in which the portraits of subjectivity offered by a text need to be evaluated for their effects on the reader’s own subjectivity.

Despite sidestepping the modalities of agency in which the self or other might be described as having effects on the self and the self’s perception of the world, the practice of imagining oneself in the world of the text still nurtures the imaginative capacities at the core of the self. Therefore, this reading practice represents a style of engagement with the other in

²⁵² Paul Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191.

²⁵³ In this chapter, I discuss “identification” in Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁵⁴ See especially the dialectic of “identification” and “inspiration” that Lynn Neal describe in the practice of reading evangelical romance, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*, 137.

which being drawn out of the self into another world enables the flourishing of creativity even though the world that is explored through the imagination has its limits. The imaginative possibilities that the women in these groups play with sometimes exceed the possibilities offered by the text itself, but the exercise of the imagination also needs the other world of the text with all of its limitations in order to have a place to play. In the conclusion, I explain how accounts of the self in which primary sociality is intrinsically tied to the creative capacities at the core of the self, like those of Lois McNay and the visionary pragmatism of African-American women that Cynthia Willett describes, provide a way to explain how being drawn outside of the self into relationship with the other is necessary for selfhood.²⁵⁵ Like resonating with the stories of others and struggling and wallowing in doctrinal texts, exploring the “imaginative variations” of the self in the other world of biblical narrative is a religious reading practice that escapes the logic of autonomy and heteronomy that assumes that the other is always a potential threat to the self. The playfulness and laughter in the Mysterion group and Thursday meeting of the Breathing Space group reveal the imaginative and creative relationship at the core of the practice of reading biblical narrative, which belie attempts to assign causal agency to either the women in these groups or the texts under discussion.

²⁵⁵ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000); Cynthia Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence: Freedom in Analytic, Postmodern, and Pragmatist Feminisms,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* (Spring 2003). See also the expanded version of Willett’s argument in “Visionary Pragmatism and the Ethics of Connectivity: An Alternative to Autonomy” in *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, ed. Maurice Hamington and Celia N. Bardwell Jones (New York: Routledge, 2012). I am most interested in Willett’s reading of Audre Lorde’s essay “The Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984).

Reading the Biblical Text in a Narrative Mode

The Mysterion group, as I discuss in chapter one, was reading a spiritual memoir by Anne Lamott when I began attending the group. The group had been following a pattern of alternating between biblical and non-biblical texts. So when they finished with the Anne Lamott book, they decided to begin reading the book of Mark, which is considered by biblical scholars to be the earliest account of Jesus's ministry in the Bible. The narrative of Mark describes Jesus' ministry with narrative accounts of his healing and miracle actions, his interactions with his disciples and the Pharisees, the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, as well as recording Jesus's teaching in the form of parables (moral stories). After the group was done reading Mark, the women decided that it would be interesting to read another gospel narrative in order to compare it to Mark and decided to read the book of John. The book of John is understood to be written later than the book of Mark and contains both more narrative detail and more theological writing than the book of Mark. Instead of recounting Jesus' teaching through parables, the book of John relies heavily on theological conversations between Jesus and a variety of characters and Jesus's speeches in order to describe Jesus teaching.

The Breathing Space Thursday group was part of the larger Breathing Space ministry at Heights Neighborhood Church, in which groups arranged around different topics and texts met for semester-length intervals. During this spring semester of 2010, this group had gathered to study the book of Exodus led by Monica. Monica was a popular Breathing Space group leader known for her interest and skill in studying biblical texts. She guided this group of women through the narratives in Exodus about the Israelites' slavery in Egypt, the exodus

and deliverance from slavery by Yahweh through Moses, and the subsequent wandering in the wilderness in preparation for settling in Canaan.

While these texts—the gospels of Mark and John and the book of Exodus—are overwhelmingly narrative texts in that they contain “a story which describes a sequence of actions and experiences of a certain number of characters,” nonetheless narrative is not the only genre of discourse contained in these biblical texts.²⁵⁶ In Exodus, the narrative of the Israelites in Egypt and in the desert is interrupted by legal discourse and detailed instructions for the building of the tabernacle. The gospel of John might even be categorized as a quasi-narrative considering how much theological commentary is inserted by the narrator or inserted into the mouth of Jesus as monologues, causing the narrative context to recede from view when Jesus’ speeches stretch over several chapters without returning to the setting of these speeches. In these non-narrative interludes in both texts, we see the form of the discussion shift in both of these groups from imaginative discourse to more theological discourse, providing some of the strongest evidence for a link between genres of texts and genres of reading practice. In particular, it suggests that the strategies of reading narrative through imagining the world and the characters are distinct to the narrative form.

For instance, in Mysterion’s discussion of the book of John, the women spent more of their discussion on theological concepts and referred to the study guide’s discussion of theological concepts to a degree commensurate with the presence of theological discourses in John. These theological discussions began early in the book of John, where the women debated the meaning of the imagery of light and dark and being from above or below and struggled with the description of firm boundaries of who is in and who is out of the Christian

²⁵⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function” in *Hermeneutics in the Human Sciences*, 277.

community in John.²⁵⁷ This struggle continued over several meetings as the women shared their own views of how and whether faithful and good adherents of other religions were saved.²⁵⁸ Later in chapters 14 through 17, where Jesus' last speeches to the disciples are recorded, the Mysterion women had a long discussion about the identity of the Holy Spirit that Jesus describes and then the next week discussed what it means to be in the world but not of it and how the Christian community can be diverse yet unified.²⁵⁹ Yet in chapter 18, when the text shifts back to a narrative mode to recount the events leading up to Jesus' death, the women's discussion also shifts back to the strategies of entering the world of the text.²⁶⁰

In the Thursday Breathing Space group, the shift away from narrative happens at several points in the discussion of Exodus, but happens most strikingly during the text's instructions about the priest's garments.²⁶¹ In this discussion the women sought to discover the symbolic meaning of the different elements and colors of the ephod (an apron-like garment worn by the priests underneath their special breastplate), referring to a website that suggested theological meanings for each of the colors. These women also applied a spiritualized approach to these garments in which they discussed what it means for Christians to be set apart inwardly, since their theological tradition of Protestantism teaches that it is what is in the heart that matters, not outer garments.²⁶²

Despite these occasional shifts in conversation, the imaginative mode of reading that narrative invites is strong enough that the women in both of these groups also use imaginative ways of entering narratives to make sense of the non-narrative elements that

²⁵⁷ Mysterion meeting, April 20, 2010.

²⁵⁸ I analyze these discussions of religious insiders and outsiders in more detail in chapter four.

²⁵⁹ Mysterion meetings, July 27, 2010 and August 10, 2010.

²⁶⁰ Mysterion meeting, August 24, 2010.

²⁶¹ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, March 18, 2010.

²⁶² I discuss the assumption that private, individual religious experience is more authentic than socially or institutionally framed religious experience in white Protestantism in chapter four.

appear in the texts. When the Breathing Space group came to the section of laws in chapters 21 to 23 of Exodus, they imagined why the Israelites would have needed these laws.²⁶³ Were they having disputes with each other in the desert? They imagined the situations in which the laws would have made sense, like how the rules about whether you are culpable when you strike a household intruder would have seemed to someone who was intruded upon and felt vulnerable. They also imagined the experiences of the Israelites as they were building the tabernacle.²⁶⁴ What materials would they have had and where did they get them? They imagined that Moses had gotten together a committee and would have needed all the details that Yahweh gave them in order get them organized.

Similarly, the Mysterion group reminded themselves when reading chapters 14 and 15 where the last speeches to the disciples begin that the narrative context was still the Last Supper before Jesus's death.²⁶⁵ They then imagined how the disciples would have heard this speech, whether they would have understood it and whether they had a sense of what was coming. On the other hand, they imagined Jesus' motivations for speaking words of comfort to the disciples but that he was probably having a hard time making himself understood. They joked about where was the Holy Spirit then, to elucidate his words for the disciples about the Holy Spirit coming after Jesus left, when they did not yet even know he was leaving. The rest of this chapter will describe these imaginative strategies for dealing with narrative in greater detail, so it will suffice to mention here that even disruptions to the narratives in the text illustrate the connections between the genre of narrative and imaginative reading.

²⁶³ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, March 4, 2010.

²⁶⁴ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, March 11, 2010.

²⁶⁵ Mysterion meeting, July 27, 2010.

The Secondary World of the Text and Imaginative Variations of the Ego

A central problematic in Ricoeur's work is how the category of reference is reconfigured by narrative and poetic discourse. In his early thinking on this problem, he argues that the written form of discourse abolishes its ostensive function in which the reference of discourse would be "determined by the ability to point to a reality common to the interlocutors."²⁶⁶ In his analysis, this abolition of the ostensive reference is "true of fictional literature—folktales, myths, novels, plays – but also of all literature which could be called poetic, where language seems to glorify itself at the expense of the referential function of ordinary discourse."²⁶⁷ However, rather than simply failing to refer to reality, this abolition of first order reference opens up a second order reference, which Ricoeur argues is a more primordial reference that reaches what Heidegger describes as "being-in-the-world." Therefore, what is opened up by this second order reference is a kind of proposed world which the reader could inhabit and again Ricoeur draws on the language of Heidegger to say that this is a world "wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities."²⁶⁸ This what Ricoeur means by the world of the text, it is the alternative world opened up by the reference in the text that points beyond our everyday world.

Later in his work, Ricoeur expands this notion of a second-order reference through investigations into the narrative mode of discourse more generally. In his essay "Imagination in Discourse and Action," Ricoeur relies on Aristotle's articulation of the mimetic function of poetry and the notion of emplotment to suggest that we can extend this function of re-description, or describing an alternative world, to all modes of "recounting" or of "telling a

²⁶⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 141.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 142.

story.”²⁶⁹ He argues that it is through the imagination that re-description opens up “the free play of possibilities in a state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or of action. It is in this state of noninvolvement that we try out new ideas, new values, new ways of being in the world.”²⁷⁰ The capacity of the imagination allows a reader or audience of a story to enter into worlds that are “unreal” or significantly different from the everyday world of ostensive reference.

In his essay called “Appropriation” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Ricoeur explores the relationship between the reader and the imaginative possibilities opened up in the world of the text. He says that “the author’s subjectivity, submitted to imaginative variations becomes a model offered by the narrator to the subjectivity of his [sic] reader. The reader as well is invited to undergo an imaginative variation of his ego.”²⁷¹ This imaginative variation seems to be exactly what the women in these Bible studies have done in their discussions of Mark, John, and Exodus. Ricoeur is also anxious that we understand that the “imaginative variations of the ego” are not a projection of the reader’s subjectivity onto the text. Furthermore, Ricoeur describes the ego entering into play with the text, saying that “in allowing itself to be carried off towards the reference of the text, the ego divests itself of itself.”²⁷² In other words, the women momentarily suspend their own subjectivities in order to enter the world of the text and the subjectivities of the characters.

From this perspective, the laughter and playfulness that appears in the discussions I have excerpted above can be understood as a byproduct of the imaginative play of picking up possible subjectivities in the world of the text. In his definition of play, Ricoeur is drawing

²⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and Action” in *From Text to Action* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 176.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 174.

²⁷¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 189.

²⁷² Ibid, 191.

from Gadamer's discussion of play in *Truth and Method* where Gadamer asserts that play is a modality that has a special relation to seriousness, where serious purposive actions are "curiously suspended."²⁷³ This aspect of playfulness, that of suspending the serious, seems apt in describing what the women do in their discussions as well. For instance, in response to a comment about how the Israelites' first response at the lack of water was not to ask Yahweh for help, Monica says "My smart aleck Moses would have said, 'Do you think I got a case of Deerspring in the back of a car?'"²⁷⁴ This kind of joking comment seems devoid of any religious significance and rather to derive from the playful practice of imagining Moses's response to the Israelites' complaining.

Yet, as I will demonstrate below, the women in these groups do comment on the religious significance of the narratives in the text, especially when it relates to the human characters and their responses to God. How then should we understand the effect of playfully "suspending" one's subjectivity and reconcile the suspension of the serious purposeful action with what would seem to be the purposeful reading for religious significance? Consider this passage on the paradoxes of reading from Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*,

Reading is by turns an interruption in the course of action and as a new impetus to action. These two perspectives on reading result directly from its function of confrontation and connection between the imaginary world of the text and the actual world of readers. To the extent that readers subordinate their expectations to those developed in the text, they themselves become unreal to a degree comparable to the unreality of the fictive world toward which they emigrate. Reading then becomes a place, itself unreal, where reflection takes a pause. On the other hand, insasmuch as readers incorporate—little matter whether consciously or unconsciously—into their vision of the world the lessons of their readings, in order to increase the prior readability of this vision, then reading is for them something other than a place where they come to rest; it is a medium they cross through.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation," 182.

²⁷⁴ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 18, 2010.

²⁷⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative. Vol. 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 179.

I would argue that, at least in the case of reading a text in a group of readers rather than the case of the solitary reader that Ricoeur seems to be invoking here, Ricoeur's assertion here that "reflection takes a pause" during reading is too absolute and is rather something that happens by degrees or along a continuum of reflection to imagination. Nonetheless, Ricoeur's insight that reading is a place that the readers pass through and become "unreal" as they do so is helpful in explaining the relationship between the imaginative process of reading biblical narrative and the process of finding religious significance. While the women in the *Mysterion* and Thursday Breathing Space groups are engaging the imaginative possibilities of a text and enter into the "unreal," alternative world of the text, the process of finding religious significance is temporarily, if only momentarily, put on hold.

Furthermore, Ricoeur's description of reading as a place where action is interrupted but also generative of new action is also significant in the analysis of the effects of passing through the medium of the imaginary world of the text. The imaginative mode of reading does not have effects in the sense that the world of the text causes effects in the world of the reader or that the reader takes the world of the text as one's own, since the suspension of the real world is what allows entry into the alternative world by the imagination. The reader may still carry elements of the alternative world back into the real world of her life, but these stow-away effects are not essential to the passage between the worlds nor even the primary result of the practice of imaginative reading. Rather, the exercise of the imagination itself is the primary "effect" of the practice of imaginatively entering the world of the text. In the essay on "Appropriation," Ricoeur emphasizes the way that the imaginative variations of the ego exercise the capacities for being through entering other modes of being. Ricoeur insists that appropriation is the process by which "the revelation of new modes of being...gives the

subject new capacities for knowing himself [sic].” He goes on to say, “it is not in the first instance the reader who projects himself. The reader is rather broadened in his capacity to project himself by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself.”²⁷⁶ By passing through the medium of the text and especially the other subjectivities presented by the text, the result is the creation of potentialities for the self rather than pre-determined worlds and modes of being.

Imaginatively Entering Narratives as Real, Historical, and Religious

The religious nature of the biblical narratives may seem incompatible with the practice of imaginatively entering into the world of the text for the Mysterion and Thursday Breathing Space groups. In actuality, the fact that these texts are religious may enhance the ability to imaginatively enter the world of the text because the text is presumed to be “real.” The religious features of the genre of biblical narrative do make Mark, John, and Exodus distinctive in relationship to other kinds of narratives, such as fiction.²⁷⁷ Nonetheless, the narrative features of these texts are still engaged through imaginative discussions. For instance, Monica, the leader of the Thursday Breathing Space group, always began the discussion by asking, “What struck you?” Sometimes the leader of the Mysterion group, Christina, would get the discussion going by asking what happened in the section the group had read last time, as if to get the group imaginatively back into the story. These ways of

²⁷⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” 192.

²⁷⁷ Ricoeur did consider biblical and religious narratives as a special case of fictional narrative. In “Philosophy and Religious Language,” Ricoeur applies his understanding of the functioning of all literary texts to religious texts proposing that “religious texts are kinds of poetic texts: they offer modes of redescribing life, but in such a way that they are differentiated from other forms of poetic texts.” He argues that they differ in the fact that religious texts have more God-reference and in the willingness of the reader to be interpreted by the text. Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 43-44.

opening the discussion seemed to invite the other women to share what parts of the narrative they had particular ease in imagining or to share elements of the story that they did not understand, which often led to imagining the scene in order to discuss its significance. The imaginative practices of these women readers suggest not that they consider the world of the text to be fictive, but rather that they experience the texts as distant from them historically and culturally and that they expect the world of the text to challenge their own sense of the world. Whatever the need to use imagination to bridge this sense of distance, the women in these groups do believe that the world of the text is contiguous with their own world.

The contiguity of the world of the text and the worlds of these Protestant women readers is rooted in the God-reference of the biblical narratives. For these women, the character of God exists both in the world of the text and in their own religious world and therefore Yahweh and Christ cease to be simply characters in the text or even characters in the past, but rather the God that they know and experience in their own lives. Furthermore, I also observed elisions in their discussions between the human characters in the text and themselves. Presuming, as has been traditional in Christian thought, that human nature is relatively unchanging throughout time, enables the Breathing Space and Mysterion groups to imaginatively read the biblical narratives as if they themselves were the Israelites or the disciples. The religious subject of the narratives, as dealing with the relationships between God and humans creates a bridge between the world of the text and the world of the readers.

Additionally, the women in the Mysterion and Thursday Breathing Space groups treat these texts as historical accounts that refer to “something ‘real,’ in the sense that that about which they speak was observable by witnesses in the past.”²⁷⁸ Historical commentary on the Bible was also used extensively as an opening into the world of the text. However, there is a

²⁷⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 3, 157.

significant difference the kinds of secondary resources used by the two groups to help them imagine this world in the Bible. Both of the groups rely heavily on the notes in their Bibles to provide them with clarifications and historical details, but the kinds of historical scholarship offered in these notes differed depending on the edition of the Bible used. Neither of these groups uses one translation or edition of the Bible exclusively and there are versions of the Bible that are used in both groups, with the exception of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The NRSV, a translation often used in university settings and liberal seminary classrooms, is often accompanied with “historical-critical” commentary in its “study Bible” editions.²⁷⁹ Some of the members of Mysterion used this version of the Bible and its usage is more common in liberal Protestant circles. Nonetheless, more conservative versions like the New International Version (NIV) were used in both groups as well.

As I mentioned in chapter two, the use of “historical-critical” or social scientific approaches to the Bible that do not presume supernatural authorship is one of the practices that distinguishes liberal Protestantism from its evangelical counterparts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Mysterion group is more likely to draw on historical-critical scholarship about the Bible than the Breathing Space group. Christina, the leader of Mysterion’s discussions on Mark, was trained at a mainline seminary and uses the *Sacra Pagina* commentary on Mark to provide historical details for consideration in the discussion and imagine the perspectives of the author and original audience.²⁸⁰ On several occasions, she

²⁷⁹ For example, the *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), used by Emily and myself, contains historical-critical notes and carries the imprimatur of the Society of Biblical Literature.

²⁸⁰ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark (Sacra Pagina)* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002). The *Sacra Pagina* series aims to make contemporary scholarship on the Bible accessible for pastoral use.

mentioned the idea that events in the gospel narratives that seem like they would have been embarrassing to the early Christians are more likely to actually happened, which is a principle used in scholarship on the historical Jesus.²⁸¹

In contrast, the Thursday Breathing Space group relies more on conventional historical knowledge to imagine the historical milieu of the Exodus narrative. Monica, the leader of Thursday Breathing Space, seems to consult commentaries in preparation for the group meetings, but she does not refer to those commentaries specifically in the discussion. Rather, in one of the discussions on Exodus, she provides websites to the rest of the group to supplement the discussion on what the priestly garments would have looked like. She exercises judgment on which of these websites are too secular (Wikipedia) and draws more heavily on an internet author whom she calls “kooky website guy” for the theological significance of the colors of the garment.²⁸² She recognizes that she cannot evaluate where this internet author got his information, but she more readily accepts the resources that she deems Christian versus those who might be “secular.”²⁸³

Despite these differences in acceptable secondary sources, Mysterion’s use of historical-critical scholarship does not seem to lead the women in the group to treat the narrative that they are reading as an less real for them. The world of the text is still a place that they feel they can occupy freely and the use of historical scholarship seems to be a significant help in imagining the world of the text. Furthermore, both groups of women deal

²⁸¹For example, Christina offers the explanation that the more embarrassing items in the narratives are more likely to have happened in response to Sarah’s question about why Jesus would have been baptized by John, when Jesus is supposed to be without sin and John’s baptism was supposed to be a repentance from sin. Mysterion meeting, October 6, 2009.

²⁸²Breathing Space Thursday meeting, March 11, 2010.

²⁸³The discernment of what are appropriate secondary sources for religious reading is largely determined by religious tradition, as I discuss in chapter two in terms of which texts are appropriate for “wallowing.” Also, the need to guard oneself against non-approved Christian materials is particularly prominent in the evangelical groups, which I will discuss more fully in chapter four.

with commentary that questions the historical details in the biblical texts by pointing to the possibility that the texts point to realities that are only accessible through symbolism or more poetic levels of meaning. For example, Diane, when she was leading the discussion on John's narration of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, provided a suggestion from the study guide about the uncertain historicity of the encounter.

Diane: One thing Gench points out, we can think about this as we go on, John is the only gospel writer that includes this story, it's not in any of the others. And that some think that it's not a historical happening, that it's a symbolic happening. We can think about that as we read and whether you buy that or not, that's fine. Something to think about what might be more symbolic about this encounter. And what I've always found interesting, she doesn't talk about this, but this is the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone recorded in the gospels. And it's amazing that is with this woman of Samaria, that in itself is fascinating. But then also too, I'm like, who wrote this down? No one else was there, the disciples were off. I'm not saying that that means it didn't happen necessarily, but it has always seemed an odd thing about this story. It seems so private.²⁸⁴

The idea that this conversation could be “a symbolic happening” does not contradict the idea that this encounter really did happen for Diane. At the same time, Diane entertains the idea that if this did not happen as it was written in the text, aspects of the conversation like its lengthiness and the fact that it includes a Samaritan woman, who would have been considered an outsider culturally and religiously from Jesus's perspective, could symbolically point to something real and significant for her religious perspective.

The Mysterion group also relied on historical scholarship when the stylistic or narrative strategies of the gospel writers brought the constructedness of the text into view. In these situations, the historical scholarship often helps the women in the group to imagine the original author and the implied readers of the narrative. For instance, Christina refers to the early readers of Mark in order to understand why the author may have inserted elements into

²⁸⁴ Mysterion meeting, May 4, 2010.

the narrative in order to be comforting to early Christian community facing persecution.²⁸⁵ Again, in contrast, the women in the Breathing Space group refer to the book of Exodus as having been written by Moses, which is not the common view in historical scholarship of the Hebrew Bible. In addition, these women have a strong sense that they are also the implied readers of the book of Exodus, asserting that the promises for the Israelites are also promises for them as well and that “God set up these pictures for us to look into.”²⁸⁶ Yet the sense that they are the implied readers of these narratives can also lead to a more symbolic understanding of the texts and that the narrative might not have literal accuracy. Here, Monica explains the possibility that the number of Israelites who left Egypt that is provided in the text might have symbolic significance.

Monica: To go back to that, I was trying to follow up on that because we were watching the Olympics and they said “Vancouver is a city of approximately 2 million people.” And I said, “Two million people? That's what we said the Exodus was.” But I was reading and (*in put on deeper voice*) *scholars are actually unsure* as to how many people left. Because if the numbers were done figuratively, and apparently there's this little, the equivalent of a pun, in the numbers... It was 603,550. The way they are done, and I didn't understand all this, 603 could be taken to mean “the whole Israelite community.” That number could actually mean that phrase. And then 550 had something to do with fighting tribes and then plus one for Moses, and I'm sorry I could read all this but... But then at a later point, the number of first born children is given to be 29,000. Well, that would be far too few for the number that they've given. So they really don't know. I thought that was interesting, it's still a lot more people than what we think of, I think, but we don't really know how many. But the way it's done in the Hebrew, the emphasis is that it was the whole Israelite community. No Israelite was left behind. And it might have been literally 603,550, it's just that the numbers don't quite match. None of the numbers match, so they don't really know.

Dawn: They didn't have a census bureau.

Monica: Yeah, they didn't have a census bureau, making commercials (*chuckles*).

Nicole: It's still a lot of people.

Monica: Yes. What I thought what was neat what is that *even* if you read it symbolically, what God was saying was that the entire, the whole of who I meant to bring out is out. No one was left behind.

Dawn: Which is probably more important to know than exactly how many there were.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Mysterion meeting, December 15, 2009.

²⁸⁶ Breathing Space Thursday meetings, April 15, 2010 and February 18, 2010.

²⁸⁷ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 18, 2010.

Monica refers to the scholarly sources she read that provide evidence of figurative language in the Hebrew version of the text and that point to the inconsistencies in the numbers provided in the text. From a modern reader's perspective, these numeral inconsistencies and figurative speech would cast doubt on the historical accuracy of the text. Monica and Dawn explain the inconsistencies as understandable since they imagine that the Israelite community would not have the same bureaucratic structure that we have in the modern nation-state. Furthermore, Monica finds the figurative reading of the number of Israelites as indicating "the whole Israelite community" more compelling in terms of narrating God's purpose than a historically accurate account.

Both of these examples demonstrate that it is not necessary for all of the events in and features of the biblical texts themselves to have "actually happened" for them to be considered "real" for these readers. Rather it is simply necessary that the women be able to imagine a perspective in which the events in the text are meaningful and therefore point to a deeper sense of reality. Certainly, the women in these groups treat the biblical narratives as real and would argue against the idea that these narratives are fictional, even if they might concede that they are sometimes poetic and refer to the world in symbolic language. Nonetheless, in this case it appears that the category of the real is not tied to the everyday world but to what is imaginable and to what can be accessed in an alternative world through the imagination. In a similar way, Elizabeth Long discusses the need to be able to imagine characters as real in the book groups that she studied. She argues that, "in a sense, the novel may have to have the ontological equivalence of the real world in order to become comparable to personal experience. Only if it 'feels real' can it enter into someone's subjectivity with the power to provoke the kinds of expansive reflection these discussants

desire.”²⁸⁸ Perhaps then the distinctions between historical, religious, and fictional realities are less significant than the fact that the genre of narrative invites readers to imaginatively enter the world of the text and to temporarily leave the everyday world behind.²⁸⁹ At least in the Mysterion and Thursday Breathing Space groups, the ability to reading for religious significance extends category of the real beyond the historical through the imagination.

Inhabiting Subjectivities Within the Text

The most prominent way that the women in these groups read “religiously” is by comparing themselves to the human characters in the text. The primary mode of discussing these human characters is that they inhabit the subjectivities and imagine the perspectives of these characters. Since the behavior of the human characters, especially the Israelites or the disciples as collective characters, is rarely seen as exemplary by the women in these groups, the human characters could be seen as examples of how not to be properly Christian. However, the practice of imagining oneself in the place of these characters tends to diffuse the censure that readers initially apply to the characters in the text or even the negative light cast on these characters in the text. In this sense, the evaluation of the characters in the text moves from “we ought or ought not to be like them” to “we are like them.” In some cases, the women’s use of pronouns slips and names and tenses are substituted so that the women are effectively saying, “we are them.” It appears that the practice of imagining oneself in the text sometimes preempts the attempt to find religious significance in the form of defining how, “we should be.”

²⁸⁸ Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs, Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, 152.

²⁸⁹ Ricoeur has problematized the distinction between historical and fictional reference to reality when he argues that all narratives abolish their first-order reference to reality and open up a second-order reference to possible realities. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 157.

In the Mysterion group, the elisions between humans in the text, human beings more generally, and the women themselves was encouraged a practice that Christina introduced to the group. In the first meeting where they discussed the book of Mark, Christina suggested that the group answer the questions “Who is Jesus?” and “Who are humans?” at the end of each other their discussions of Mark. Christina then suggested at the next meeting that they write words that answered each of those questions on a sheet of paper so that they could track their answers throughout the book of Mark. The group readily adopted these practices and continued answering these questions at the end of each meeting and writing down their answers as they read the book of John after Christina had moved away. On the first day, in response to Christina’s asking if there were any more thoughts on what it means to be human in this text, Laura responded, “Needing to be healed. God can make us whole, he has the power and authority to do that.”²⁹⁰ In her response, Laura is clearly eliding Jesus and God and those healed in the text with humans more generally. Christina continually joked that the phrasing of the question “Who are humans?” was awkward and when the group began a new sheet for the book of John, she changed the question to “Who are we?,” further solidifying the elision between the human characters in the text and the women themselves.

While Christina’s practice of dwelling on the character of God and the depictions of humans in the text was probably intended to provoke reflection about the religious significance of the text by focusing on the relationship between God and humans, the majority of the discussions about the characters in the text in both groups remain on the level of inhabiting the subjectivities of the characters and do not move to discussing religious significance. This was the most obvious in the Breathing Space group where Monica had offered a structure for the group discussions in which the group was invited to ask questions

²⁹⁰ Mysterion meeting, October 6, 2009.

and discuss the details of the text for the day and then move to a discussion of how the text applies to their own lives. In practice, the discussion in the Breathing Space group never spent a significant amount of time discussing “how this text can be applied in my life” and Monica rarely explicitly directed the conversation towards what would be called issues of application. Rather, the instances of the discussion of the religious significance of the text appeared intermingled with the practice of imagining the perspectives of the characters.

In their discussions of the disciples, the Mysterion women negotiate whether or not to judge the behavior of the disciples and alternate between sympathizing with them and censuring them. Nonetheless, in both of these modalities, the Mysterion women move in and out of the perspectives of the human characters in the text and the behavior of the human characters is justified through imagining that the women in the group are just like them. For example, in a discussion early in the study of Mark, the women sympathize with the disciples’ confusion about what Jesus could mean by telling them to “Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” Diane understands the disciples’ explanation that Jesus must be angry with them because they don’t have any bread, because “whenever you are around someone you really want to impress, whether it’s fear or something else, you second guess everything you do.”²⁹¹ On the other hand, in this discussion almost at the end of the Mysterion group’s study of Mark, there is some disagreement about whether Peter’s denial of Jesus is a good example of repentance when followers of Christ fail. Laura, who earlier in the discussion expressed disappointment at the way that the disciples ran away in fear after Jesus was arrested, seems reluctant here to extend to Peter the status of example. The more that the other women defend Peter, the more they imagine events from his perspective and talk about how they feel that they fail and inadvertently sin just like Peter did.

²⁹¹ Mysterion meeting, December 15, 2009.

Sarah: It takes the whole idea of abandonment to the extreme where it's almost comical to us. The idea of the sheep being scattered and how they left him and fled, when I read that I'm overcome with sadness. We have always needed Jesus but the one time when he needed us, we left.

Christina: That's a good segue to the denial of Peter, the next section. I have the final 19 verses as one big chunk, Jesus before the Sanhedrin and the denial by Peter. Thoughts?

Laura: Peter, you just want him to step up to the plate and he doesn't.

Christina: I kind of love Peter for that reason, because and the commentary talks about this too and says it very concisely, (*reading*) *Peter emerges as both an example to be avoided and a source of consolation because he is the forgiven sinner.* We aren't to do what Peter does, but Peter still receives God's grace. I think he's so human. I can see myself saying, "I'm never deserting you, never ever ever." And then in the moment, just getting scared.

Laura: But he doesn't even have a good reason for denying

Lisa: That he would die too?

SLK: Just fear. Whether he was really going to be taken by somebody or not, he didn't know what was going on and he's afraid that they're going to come after him next.

Laura: It's just not one of the moments that's really chaotic and his life is on the line.

SLK: It's true, they're just standing around.

Sarah: It's not like it's at gun point or knife point.

Lisa: But I kind of get that sense though, they're in a crowd...

SLK: It's one of the servant girls of the high priest. So it's not just anybody.

Lisa: But it's one of those things, when she's like, "Aren't you with him?" And then she's spreading the word to other people, "Isn't he with him? Shouldn't he be on trial too?" I think I would deny him too.

Emily: Could turn into a crowd attacking.

Christina: And Peter's been denying things all along. Isn't it in Mark, the "Get behind me Satan" passage? Where Peter's like "No, this isn't really going to happen" and Jesus is like... I do love and Mark doesn't do this, but John has the denial take place around a charcoal fire. And then Jesus's resurrection appearance happens at a charcoal fire and I love the connection, that they're having breakfast and eating there. We don't get that in Mark.

SLK: It's true, at the end of this passage, when it says, "He broke down and wept." He remembered what Jesus had told him. I don't know if it's comforting or not, but it's the deepest sort of self-loathing. He just knew he had screwed up real bad.

Laura: I was glad that he cried.

Sarah: If that sentence or that verse hadn't been added, I think it would have been really easy to separate myself from that kind of situation. But with that last verse added where... You know how many times you screwed up and you know you did and just that feeling. And you don't even know until after it's happened. That brings it back to you know he was trying so hard to be a good disciple and he had such good intentions, but because he's human...

Christina: At least he showed up, the other people just ran away...

Laura: The fact that he cries, you can't be as mad at him. When you say to someone, "I just

so mad at myself and so embarrassed.” And someone will say to you, “Well if you didn’t feel that way, that’s when I’d be worried.” That’s how I felt. I’m really glad that he cried, if he wasn’t then I would be like, “Don’t you feel bad at all?” But he does feel bad.

Lisa: It almost seemed like it happened so fast for him. At that particular moment, the cock crowed and he broke down and wept. It’s almost like realization of how many times he had said it.

Sarah: And an acknowledgement that you sin without even realizing it sometimes. I guess he was just caught up in the moment and it’s after the fact when you need to repent.²⁹²

Sarah’s elision between the disciples and “us” in her comment that “the one time when he needed us, we left” sets the tone for the discussion of Peter’s denial of Christ as something we also do or would do. In response to Laura’s assessment that Peter did not even have a good reason for denying Christ, the other women provide their imaginings of the interchange between Peter and the servant girl in which Peter has very real reason to fear. Eventually, Laura herself begins to soften her perspective towards Peter when she offers an example of how she would feel angry at herself for messing up. It is Peter’s remorse that she eventually can inhabit and understand.

The Thursday Breathing Space group’s discussions of the Israelites contain similar moments of vacillating between being impatient with the complaining of the Israelites and being sympathetic to the Israelites’ concerns about traveling in the desert. In this conversation, Andrea and Ellie are the ones who wish the Israelites would be more exemplary characters and the other women imagine themselves similarly fearful when in need.

Andrea: I was reading ahead in chapter 17, they’ve been out one month and 15 days, and they don’t have any water and they’re already whining about it. It’s one and half months and you are forgetting that he’s going to take care of you? I get so irritated with them.

Ellie: It’s funny, after singing the song and Miriam, they’re all praising God. And then it’s one verse, two verses really, verse 22 and 23 and then they are grumbling again.

Heather: Except no water in the desert is pretty serious.

²⁹² Mysterion meeting, February 9, 2010.

Andrea: It is, but if God just parted *the sea*, you'd think...

Ellie: (*overlapping and agreeing with Andrea*) But so is the Egyptian army coming after you... They were starving too. We're going to have the manna and the pheasants falling from the sky.

Andrea: But then they fuss about something else.

Nicole: But like what you said, Ellie, we all do the same thing. God is probably like, "Don't you remember last week when I provided for you, don't you remember yesterday??"

Elizabeth: How much money was lost in our retirement accounts during the recession and how many of us said, "God, don't worry about it. I'm not worried. Oh well, it's all your money. You'll take care of me when I get to that point of need." No, we probably all freaked a little bit, "Whoa, that was a big minus sign there." (*laughter*)²⁹³

Ellie seems to switch sides in this discussion almost mid-sentence when she first imagines that the Israelites should remember how they were delivered from the Egyptian army, but then agrees with Heather's imagining that no food and water in the desert would be something be concerned about. Finally, Nicole and Elizabeth seem to have the last word by saying that the women present could be just like the Israelites because of their shared human nature. It is the ability to imagine themselves both in the characters in the narrative and to imagine themselves in similar situations in their lives that allows them to soften the criticism of the Israelites in the discussion.

Despite their undeniable presence in the Mysterion and Thursday Breathing Space groups, the conversations about whether or not the women in these groups should emulate the human characters in the text did not dominate the conversations that the women had. The secondary world of the biblical world presents multiple subjectivities with which to engage and multiple actions and encounters within which to probe the motivations of all of the characters present. These practices of inhabiting the characters and imagining the multiple possibilities present within individual characters were more prevalent in both of these groups' discussions than deciding what those characters' perspectives might mean for these

²⁹³ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 11, 2010.

women's own religious perspectives. In other words, these women explore together the subjectivities or even suggestions of subjectivities in the biblical narratives.

For instance, in the Breathing Space group's discussions on Exodus, the women peer into the motivations for God's actions as well as the Israelites' responses and motivations for disobedience. Early in the book of Exodus, the group was discussing the chapters that recount the series of plagues sent upon the Egyptians in order to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave and Elizabeth asked, "Why do you think that God let the Egyptian magicians do some of these plagues? It seems like it would have been more impressive if they couldn't."²⁹⁴ At the point in the narrative where Moses is away on Mt. Sinai and the Israelites get impatient while waiting for him and fashion a golden calf to worship instead of Yahweh under the leadership of Aaron. Again Heather raises the question about God's motivations asking, "Why didn't God incinerate Aaron on the spot?"²⁹⁵ Heather then turns the discussion to why the Israelites would have made the golden calf at all and imagine the justifications the Israelites might have told themselves for their actions.

In one of the early discussions of Exodus, Monica shifted the discussion to how the Israelites would have experienced these events. In the responses to this question, the women in this group imagine a number of possible perspectives of the Israelites and even imagine differences of perspectives between the leaders and the "average Joe" Israelite.

Monica: If you are an average Joe Israelite, what are you thinking?

Dawn: "Moses is a little crazy."

Nicole: "Glad he's on my side."

Monica: Let me read you what they're... At the beginning, the foreman came after Moses has asked once, "We want to go." And Pharaoh has made it more difficult. They actually come to Moses and Aaron and say, (*reading*) "*May Yahweh look upon you and judge you. You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and you have put a sword in their hand to kill us.*" And I think Moses sums it up pretty well when he

²⁹⁴ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, January 28, 2011.

²⁹⁵ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, April 15, 2010.

- says, and he says it to Yahweh, “*Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak your name he has brought trouble on this people and you have not rescued your people at all.*” So, I would think that would be their mentality. “Um hello, it’s gotten more difficult!”
- Ellie: And if they experienced the first couple plagues they’re probably just getting more and more...bitter. Thinking Moses is a fool.
- Monica: Where would their anger and bitterness come from?
- Elizabeth: When you’re cynical and have no hope, you just get more cynical and you get more angry at the situation.
- Nicole: When you’ve been told, “Hey it’s over, you’re going to be rescued and delivered” and then it gets worse. So when is this going to get better? Maybe you hear we’re going to get rescued and you’re like, “We’ll see.” And then it gets worse and you’re like, “whatever”...
- Dawn: It says, (*reading*) *When Moses and Aaron went to the leaders of Israel, they believed them. And they all went together to Pharaoh.* So there was some hope and belief and expectation that after 400 years Yahweh’s back and something going to happen again.
- Ellie: I wonder if the average Joe who was gathering straw to build bricks would have had the same amount of faith as the leaders. Were the tribal leaders that went with Moses more educated about what they had been promised? Did they know more? Did they realize that Moses really had talked to Yahweh and this was real, so they willing to be more patient? Or were they mad too, after they’ve had frog legs for dinner for six years.
- Dawn: If they’re like most of everyone else in the world, they are probably thinking these leaders don’t know anything. They’re so stupid and ignorant. Let’s kick ‘em out and get a new set. (*laughter*)²⁹⁶

This section of the discussion focuses on the different responses that the Israelites could have been feeling: disbelief, cynicism, hope, expectation, dissatisfaction with their leaders, differences in expectations due to different levels of knowledge about what was promised, and even fear because of the power Moses was displaying through the plagues. The thrust of the conversation is to understand and inhabit the perspectives of the characters without needing to find the significance for their own perspectives on God’s actions.

The Mysterion group also discussed the motivations of different characters frequently in their discussion of John. The study guide that they were using as a companion to their own readings focused on the encounters between Jesus and other characters in the book of John. In the discussions of these encounters, we have examples of how conversations and

²⁹⁶ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, January 28, 2011.

interactions bring out discussions of the motivations of different characters. For instance, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to ask Jesus questions under the cover of night. Kelly, who was leading the discussion that week, brought up how Nicodemus was different from the Pharisees depicted in Mark and the group discussed what Nicodemus's motivations could be for coming at night and whether Nicodemus was sincere in his interest in Jesus.²⁹⁷ A few chapters later in John, the narrator recounts an encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well, which is the same encounter that seemed a little too "private" to have actually happened for Diane.²⁹⁸ This longer discussion between Jesus and a character in the narrative allows the women of Mysterion to delve into Jesus' strategies for engaging this woman and creating an intimate moment where he can discuss spiritual things with her. In this discussion, Mysterion is also able to chart how the woman is at first skeptical and guarded towards Jesus but is gradually disarmed so that she leaves her water jug to tell others about Jesus. The discussion even turns to the woman's state of mind as she leaves her jug behind and the women offer possibilities for whether she understood the symbolism of leaving her water behind or whether she was just excited and left in haste. The Mysterion women imagined these encounters both as if they were Jesus and his interlocutors, and did not come out of the world of the text to discuss whether they should interact with Jesus in the same way.

The discussions of the motivations of those characters in the text who are described as in opposition to God or God's people even more clearly demonstrates a certain kind of superfluity in the practice of inhabiting the subjectivities of the characters in the text. These are characters, like Pharaoh or Pontius Pilate, whose oppositional actions move the biblical narratives forward and yet these are characters that the Breathing Space and Mysterion

²⁹⁷ Mysterion meeting, April 20, 2010.

²⁹⁸ Mysterion meeting, May 4, 2010.

groups would never want to emulate. For instance, in a discussion of Pharaoh as he is chasing after the fleeing Israelites, Ellie puts herself in the place of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, almost to the point of imagining that she would also have wanted to kill the Israelites.²⁹⁹ This discussion begins with Monica's reflection on how Pharaoh keeps changing his mind but then moves to discussing why he chose to act as he did and chase after the Israelites with his horses and chariots. Elizabeth points out that these are the weapons of war, which leads Andrea to imagine Pharaoh and the Egyptians as riding out in rage and fear. The idea that the Egyptians and were hurt and angry about their loss is a perspective that the women might be able to share, but Ellie's comment that Pharaoh probably intended to kill the Israelites moves beyond her experience into the subjective space of a ruler who commands the power of an army. Her comment is remarkable for the way in which Ellie extends her imagination to a possible subjectivity, even though presumably she has never been in a similar situation to Pharaoh's and would never seek to be.

In the Mysterion group, there was a long discussion about John's depiction of Pilate, the roman governor who sentenced Jesus to crucifixion after Jesus was brought to him by the Jewish authorities. Pilate interrogates Jesus, has him flogged, and then asks the crowd to choose between Jesus and a criminal named Barrabas. In this discussion, Laura is particularly interested in Pilate's motivations for his actions and counters Sarah's comment that while Pilate is there for the execution, this is mainly a conflict between the Jewish authorities and Jesus. She says that she is "intrigued" by him and her interest seems to arise purely from her inquisitive nature, not for any interest in Pilate's significance for her own faith. This is an example of how these readers are drawn into the subjectivities of central characters in the narrative purely for the sake of curiosity.

²⁹⁹ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 11, 2010.

Laura: I don't necessarily think of Pilate as "whatever" though. I've always been really intrigued by him.

Diane: Let's go to that part, since we're kind of going there anyway.

Laura: Not to disagree with you (*to Sarah*). Ever since Sunday School, I've always thought that maybe he's a little bit of a coward. I suppose he's someone I would be interested in learning more about, just getting a true historical perspective on him. I don't really know anything about him, but I feel like he was real wishy-washy about the whole thing. He really had the opportunity to step in. I know that Jesus's destiny was laid out, but I think that Pilate did have the... He could have been great.

Sarah: He did challenge the accusation. He did say this man has done nothing wrong. Maybe just I wasn't very articulate. I think he was like, "Well, this guy hasn't done anything wrong, and you still want me to kill him and you'll even trade out a convicted criminal for him. You obviously want this guy dead, so I'll do it." Maybe we're saying the same thing, eventually he just got wish-washy about it, saying "Ok, whatever you want."

Laura asked if anyone knew historical information on Pilate and Diane who was leading the discussion that day read a section from the study guide that explained different possible interpretations of Pilate as a character. This guide, written by Gench, presented two opposing views of Pilate as a weak character or as a strong character. As a weak character, Pilate could be read as trying to be neutral and trying to avoid making a decision about Jesus. In contrast, as a strong character Pilate could be read as manipulating the Jewish authorities to accept his authority and the authority of Rome. Gench suggested that this reading was probably closer to the historical Pilate, who was eventually removed from office for bullying and offensive behavior. In the discussion that followed, Laura and the others eventually move closer to this reading after trying out a number of possibilities for Pilate's perspective.

Laura: I would agree with that maybe because...what he wrote on...I think that may have been a slap in the face to the Jews. So if that's the case, then I agree with the second interpretation. How he wrote Jesus is the king of the Jews.

SLK: I can agree with that. If you read this narrative from the point of view of the Pharisees, they get in bed with the powers that be and get bitten in return. They think they are getting what they want, but Pilate is just burning them. They're not gaining anything by their alliance with Pilate.

Diane: That's what he gets them to say. They should say, "There is no god but Yahweh," but then they say "Our king is Caesar." He gets them to completely throw that out the window.

SLK: Some people interpret that as they are just saying that so that he will crucify Jesus, but I think you're right, that it shows that they do not have the power in this situation. He's saying, "I'll do what you want me to do, but..." He's exacting a price that is not what they wanted to happen.

Laura: So historically he is painted as kind of arrogant?

Diane: Yeah and pretty brutal. What's come out historically, doesn't paint him as an indifferent, whatever kind of person, that he seems to be pretty harsh.

SLK: Or someone who is trying to be politically savvy and not make people upset. If he's going to be brutal, he doesn't care what people think about him.

Diane: And also would throw people under the bus, to get his own thing.

Sarah: The culture of Rome at the time is that nothing is more important than Rome. So when these Jewish Israelis [sic] come to him and ask for a favor, this first interaction with Jesus and the Jews is very much like, "I'm not going to help you. Sure this guy is crazy, but he hasn't done anything wrong, so why the heck should I help you?" That kind of indifference I guess. Then, as it goes through and he gets into that public position of power in front of the mob, that's when the brutality in him comes out. "Ok, in order for me to do what you want, you need to agree that there is nothing more important than Rome and I'm the most powerful person in this room."

SLK: I think the first interpretation, his saying do you want to me to release Jesus to you as the Passover person, seems kind of bizarre. If its really about deciding for Jesus, why would they want him released, when they are just bringing him and asking for his execution? I do go back and forth on that, whether or not that move, saying I could release him is actually a positive move in Jesus's favor, or whether its really just random brutality.

Diane: What [Gench] points out too, is that in the middle of this he has Jesus flogged, rather than at the end, which seems pretty brutal too. They're still having this conversation and it's not clear what he's going to do yet and but then he sends him to be beaten up.

Laura: Publicly. He has him publicly embarrassed.

Sarah: With what you were saying when he gives that option of releasing Jesus for the Passover...I would think in his mind he was trying to put the Pharisees between a rock and hard place. Saying, "Ok, well I'm allowed to release one person for the Passover. Would you rather have this guy or a violent criminal? You obviously want both people put away, but would you rather have this guy or would you rather have someone who will do physical harm when he's let out." Assuming it follows along with this harsh, brutal personality, that to me would be where it would stem from.

Laura: I wonder if Pilate knew all along what he was going to do and he was just playing mind games and being manipulative. I don't know if we'll ever know.

Diane: In that case, why do we have this conversation and why does John include it here? Because it's so unclear and what do we get, really, out of it? In the other gospels, Jesus is silent, pretty much. Why does he speak here?

Laura: The reason I ask that question is because he says, "What is truth?" The more we've talked about this openly, the more I think Pilate is really, really manipulative. I think he knew all along that he would crucify Jesus and he was just ultimately playing games with the Jews. And Jesus was just a pawn. That's why he said, "What is truth?"³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ Mysterion meeting, August 24, 2010.

After considering the possibilities that Pilate was indifferent to the request of the Jewish authorities or just being politically savvy, Laura settles on the interpretation that Pilate was being manipulative just to exercise his power over everyone involved. She is not interested in Diane's leading towards the meaning of Jesus's statements in the encounter with Pilate, but simply wants to satisfy her curiosity about who Pilate was and why he acted in the way that he did.

In this discussion and in the other examples from the *Mysterion* and *Breathing Space* groups, these women cycle through the characters and perspectives offered to them in the world of the biblical narrative. Whether they derive religious significance from these characters or not, whether they are imagining the perspectives God and the humans who have the collective representation of humanity or singular humans like Pilate and Pharaoh, this imaginative variation of subjectivities is a fundamental practice that undergirds the reading strategies of the women in these groups. As they get into the world of the text together, the women of *Breathing Space* and *Mysterion* offer their individual imaginations of the characters for the group's consideration, playing off each other's interpretations in order to offer their own imaginations. Most of the time, the discussion does not resolve into one interpretation, which leaves the possible interpretations that have been aired in the conversation hanging in juxtaposition to each other. While the women are then free privately to select the interpretation they individually prefer, it makes it clear that the collective practice of imagining the motivations and perspectives of individual characters is not fundamentally aimed at coming to an agreement on one religious interpretation of the text. Going through the imagination in order to reflect on the religious significance of the characters in the text, often means that any religious conclusions made in the process of

discuss are accidental byproducts of the primary activity of inhabiting subjectivities in the world of the text.

The Limitations and Surpluses of Imaginative Practice

There are limits to where the women in the *Mysterion* and Thursday Breathing Space groups are able or willing to follow the possibilities in the world of the text. As we saw in the practice of struggling with doctrinal texts, the perspectival horizons of the text and the women's perspectival horizons that are shaped by perspectives outside of the Protestant tradition are in tension with each other. In the case of imagining oneself in the world of the text, perspectives from the Protestant tradition itself are more likely to be the perspectives that produce friction with the world of the text. Each group of women is familiar with the texts that they are reading and they endeavor to measure their childhood and cultural memories of these texts against the narratives themselves. They correct their expectations of the text when discrepancies arise between the world of the text and their memory of it. Sometimes these discrepancies are simple details in what happened, such as not remembering that it was John the Baptist who first called the disciples in the book of John.³⁰¹ At other points, the narrative challenges more deeply held convictions about Protestant interpretations of who God is. In many of these cases, while the women in these groups are at the very least aware of possibilities for God's character in the narrative, they reject some of these possibilities as too challenging for their deeply held convictions about God.

As I explained above, the women in these groups put themselves in the place of God or Jesus just as much as other characters in order to understand the action of the text. Monica often takes on the voice of God to explain God's motivations in his actions with the

³⁰¹ *Mysterion* meeting, April 6, 2010.

Israelites. For instance, in describing the motivation to provide manna for the Israelites as similar to the motivation to bring plagues upon the Egyptians, she says in the voice of God, “You’re going to experience that I am Yahweh, but it was through judgment for them. Yet for the entire community, you’re going to know that I am Yahweh and that I am your God because I’m going to provide for you.”³⁰² Furthermore, many of these imaginative entries into God’s perspective are entertained in discussion because these women expect the text to challenge them and to be at odds with their own sense of the world in some places, but also because they expect the character of God in particular to exceed and challenge their expectations. In one example from *Mysterion*, a discussion of the difficulties in understanding why Jesus’s would be angry while healing a leper is understood as an acceptable challenge to a more “tame” image of Jesus.

Kelly: Yeah, you’re supposed to be in fear of God, which we Christians don’t like to think about being scared of God. We’re like, “Oh I’m so happy and let the children come to us.”

Christina: I think that’s interesting, because Jesus is not very tame in this at all. He’s out in the wilderness and he’s hanging out with John and his friends are being arrested. And now he’s saying, “Alright, drop your responsibilities and come follow me” and people are doing it. And he’s using his power to exorcise demons and he’s teaching with authority. He’s, not necessarily a bull in china shop, but he’s kind of plowing through. Get that too from the pace of the... Originally we talked about doing 2 chapters, but so much that happens in that first chapter...

Sarah: I also picture, for the term anger, I kind of picture Jesus being like, “Am I done yet?” (*laughter*) There are so many people that he’s healed and he’s like, “Let’s go to the next town, because I have all this teaching I need to do. And I got things on my list I gotta get to.” I kind of see him being like, “Ok fine, I’ll heal you but just don’t say anything because I’ve got to get going.”³⁰³

Imagining the perspective of Jesus in this case helped to explain why Jesus sternly warned a leper he healed not to tell anyone about the healing. At the same time, Christina and Kelly embrace the tension between a “nice” image of Jesus and the more prickly version of Jesus in

³⁰² Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 18, 2010.

³⁰³ *Mysterion* meeting, October 6, 2009.

this passage. Likewise, in the Breathing Space group, some moments of tension between the text's image of God and a "nice" image of God were embraced because they affirmed the unfathomableness of God. Ellie brings up the issue of the violence of God's drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea after the Israelites had escaped and crossed over on dry land. Others suggest that God's justice is "a different kind of fair, not our fair" and argue that it is hard for humans to fathom God's purposes.³⁰⁴

Yet occasionally, the uncomfortableness with the text pushes into unease and in these moments the women in Mysterion and Breathing Space seek to diffuse the tension between the possibilities of the text and perspectives on God that are more familiar. In this discussion below, the Mysterion women ruminated about a conversation between Jesus' and a Syro-Phoenician woman in which Jesus seems at first to reject the woman's request to heal her daughter because the woman is not Jewish. Sarah and Christina's comments highlight the challenge that this text represents to Christian ideas about the universality of Jesus' message and teachings. The group moves on to talking about why he would have initially rejected the Syro-Phoenician woman, but eventually a possible interpretation is raised that Laura rejects completely, presumably because poses too much of a problem for her understanding of God.

Kelly: She says, "Will you please cure my daughter?" And by saying, "Let the children be fed first instead of the dogs," I think he's saying, "Let the Jews be healed first. I'm going to cast go out the demons of all the Jews first, before I focus on all the Gentiles. I'm going to save God's people before I save you."

Sarah: (*overlapping*) Kind of controversial. I'm going to save God's people, and then when I'm done saving God's people, then I might get around to you.

Kelly: And then she says, "Even the dogs get the crumbs." Which means even if we're not a chosen person, we can still believe in God and find him. She gets his metaphor and he likes that, and so he cures.

Christina: It is confusing, because all along there has been this underlying idea that it's for God's people and but that all people are God's people. And so then for him to come back draw this line, particularly after the dispute about clean and unclean, where

³⁰⁴ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 11, 2010.

- they've just had this argument about this, for him to come back and reinforce this is weird.
- Sarah: It's almost like it was a test.
- Kelly: I think it was a test. I've thought that ever since I heard the story, that he was testing her. Just like the people who believe that even just touching his cloak will cure them, he cures because they believe that. Because she believes that even the crumbs from him will cure...
- Laura: But he doesn't test anybody else!
- Christina: I love this passage because Jesus is kind of a jerk in this passage and I love that she stands up to him and says, "Hold up."
- Tara: I wonder if that's also just because he was mad because he was trying to hide out.
(laughter)
- Morgan: Well, he was human.
- Kelly: This was definitely the human side of Jesus coming out.
- Christina: ...I think it's a challenging passage on so many levels. How to make sense of Jesus? How do we take what happens in this situation and apply it to our own congregations and how we interact with the community and who we welcome and who we don't and why...
- Laura: But he's so loving and compassionate so many of the other people. You know, the dad saying come heal my daughter and the woman who was hemorrhaging. And then this, he doesn't seem very...it doesn't make him seem as compassionate.
- Christina: Gives us another facet of who Jesus is, he's that much more complex.
- Emily: It's his human side. He was moody.
- Laura: It's like what Tara said, he just wanted a rest. He was a little annoyed that they found him and he just wanted to take a nap. (laughter)
- Christina: I think it's interesting that the previous conversation is a conflict, but it's not really initiated by Jesus. But this one is, he's the one that's instigating in the situation and poking. And to someone who hasn't really provoked him, but just seems to have been in the wrong place.
- Sarah: You know how when you have moments, like it seems like Jesus is having, and you just snap at someone or do something that you probably shouldn't have done. And someone comes back at you and is like, "Why did you do that?" or "You're wrong in what you're doing. Stop and think about it." It's like, that was just God reminding me to keep my head straight. It's kind of funny to think, would God send this woman to keep Jesus straight, would he do that?
- SLK: That's what I thought you first meant about testing.
- Laura: (in an incredulous voice) Or that maybe it was a testing for Jesus?? That's a whole 'nother way of looking at it! (laughter)... I like that you said it's showing his human side. Maybe he just snapped.³⁰⁵

Laura is more comfortable with the idea that Jesus's mistreatment of the Syro-Phoenician woman was due to a "human" irritability and that Jesus might not have been perfect in all of his emotional states than she is with the idea that Jesus would be likely enough to stray from

³⁰⁵ Mysterion meeting, December 1, 2009.

the message for God to need to send someone to set him straight. Sarah's suggestion that imagines Jesus's perspective and reasons for acting in this way leads Laura into possibilities for the relationship between God and Jesus that she is not willing to explore. Nonetheless, even though Laura rejects it, Sarah's suggestion demonstrates that the practice of imagining oneself in the world of the text can open up possibilities beyond what Protestant tradition has shaped these women to expect about God.

In the Breathing Space group, a passage that describes Moses reminding Yahweh of the covenant made with the Israelites in order to divert Yahweh destroying the Israelites in anger opened up the possibility that God's mind had changed. Elizabeth says, "Some people, these types of verses trip them up. 'Well, see God really isn't consistent; he *is* a changing God versus being unchanging. He can be swayed.' I'm thinking, well no, his character is his character. And God is having this dialoging type of relationship with Moses."³⁰⁶ Even though Elizabeth is rejecting this interpretation of the text, in her rejection she is also articulating that she recognizes she can imagine this possibility for God's character as a reading of the text. The Breathing Space group in the rest of the discussion rejects out of hand the implicit idea that God's mind had changed about his promise to the Israelites or had even been changed by Moses's intervention by imagining Moses's perspective on the intimacy of this kind of "dialoging relationship" with God.

On the other hand, while the text sometimes seems to go too far into alternative possibilities for who God might be for these women, the women of the Mysterion and Breathing Space groups also allow their imaginations to go beyond the possibilities that are offered to them in the text. In particular, both groups imagine how the human characters in the texts they were reading *could* have responded to God's actions and therefore imagine

³⁰⁶ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, April 15, 2010.

possible subjectivities beyond those that are narrated in Exodus and Mark or John. In the Breathing Space group, Dawn commented on how the Israelites could have responded to Yahweh after the Israelites have been delivered out of Egypt and been brought to a place in their desert wanderings called Elam where there was water aplenty. Ellie also comments on how they could have asked Yahweh to provide for their needs and expected Yahweh to answer.

Dawn: When I was reading the first paragraph in chapter 16, I was surprised, for one thing that they actually left Elam (*soft laughter*) and apparently there was nothing said about what a nice place it was. “We didn't have any water [before]” and “Oh, we have a respite. Oh, this is wonderful.” The only thing they did is that when they left they started complaining again. If they had even complained and been grateful at the same time, that'd be...

Monica: That'd be okay

Dawn: Not really okay, but okay-er (*chuckles*)

Monica: I can just imagine them now that you said it that way, “The pillar! It's moving! No, I don't want it to move! I like this place, there's water here!” (*soft laughter*)

Tracy: I was just thinking too, grumbling is a common word in this. Made me think, when Moses did ask Yahweh, he answered. Made me think, what if they had said, “Moses please ask God for water.” I don't know, just kind of interesting

Monica: Dawn's thought and question about that (*hear her pulling out a sheet of questions emailed ahead of time*) specifically references these first four verses of chapter 16 that, (*reading*) *They grumbled again against God about food and water and God answered them giving them food and water and this really goes against the way I think about asking God for things and why he may or may not answer.* We think he would answer more if we said (*in gentle voice*), “God could you please, we need some water. We're really thirsty. It is after all the desert.”

Dawn: (*overlapping Monica*) If you ask nice.

Tracy: “You brought us here. Can't you give us what we need?”

Ellie: Or they could have said...they could have anticipated that God would meet their needs. They could have walked out of Elam saying, “We know that there's going to be another Oasis. We know that we can trust God to provide for us because he has and we can move on in that confidence in who he is.”³⁰⁷

In this discussion, the women imagine possible perspectives that are not presented to them in the narrative itself but which could exist in the world of the text as they understand it. While the fact that in the narrative Yahweh answers the Israelites despite their bad attitude is not

³⁰⁷ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 18, 2010.

how the Breathing Space women might expect God to react, they can also imagine that the Israelites could have acted differently than the way the narrative represents them.

In a similar way, the Mysterion women imagined how the disciples *could* have reacted to the news of Jesus's resurrection. In this section at the end of John, Jesus has appeared to the disciples, but not yet to Thomas, who says that he will not believe unless he sees Jesus for himself and sees the wounds in his hands. Sarah asks the group if they thought the rest of the disciples would have believed had they been in Thomas' place. The group answers her based on the characterizations of the disciples in the narrative up until this point, imagining how the disciples would have acted had the story played out differently.

Sarah: Do you think the other disciples would have believed if Jesus wasn't in front of them and showing them his hands and his side? When you really think about it, it's not that Thomas is really that different. The disciples had seen. They knew. It wasn't like they just met him in a garden, and they were like, "Hey Jesus is back, we're not sure it was him, but we just kind of know." Do you think they would have been as trusting, as faithful?

Morgan: Given the chance? I'm inclined to say no, because that's why Jesus showed them what he did.

Emily: When Mary goes, verse 18, (*reading*) *Mary went and announced to the disciples*. Are we talking about the same disciples who are locked away because they are scared to death? That to me says no. I don't know if it's because she is a woman or because they had just been to the tomb right before here and they had seen for themselves.....

Diane: In the chapters leading up to this, we don't have a very good last vision of the disciples. One betrays him. Peter denies him three times. There aren't very many of them that we know of at the foot of the cross. Leading up to this they kind of dwindled out too. That gives credence to that thought as well that they might not believe...³⁰⁸

The other Mysterion women entertain Sarah's question and explore the possibility that had the narrative proceeded differently and had the disciples heard of Jesus's resurrection before they had seen him, the disciples could have been more like Thomas in their reaction to Jesus's resurrection. There does not seem to be a purpose to Sarah's exploratory question, just a curiosity and willingness to imagine an alternative perspective.

³⁰⁸ Mysterion meeting, September 7, 2010.

These kinds of exploratory discussions point to the way that the exercise of the imagination can be its own purpose in the reading practices that are invited by the biblical narratives. Furthermore, the laughter that is interlaced all throughout the examples I have offered in this chapter suggests that the imaginative practices of reading produce a surplus of imagining. This excess is discharged through laughter and through instances of playful imagining that verge on silliness. The women laugh at some of the characters in the text because they see the absurdity of their actions. In one example, when discussing the justifications the Israelites give for creating the golden calf, the Breathing Space group laugh at how unconvincing the Israelites seem.

Heather: They somehow rationalized that what they were doing fit. That's what's scary. We can kinda think, how could they be so dumb, but...

Ellie: But we do it in our own ways... Well, I had a chuckle, I just saw some humor in how some of these things were written. End of verse 1, (*reading and laughing*) as for this fellow Moses. This fellow... (*laughter*)

Andrea: "*We don't know what's become of him.*" (*laughter*)

Tracy: Did they really think he's not going to come back down and so they have to make their own way? Ok, we gotta figure out another plan now?³⁰⁹

It is difficult to reproduce the intonations of impersonations like Andrea's taking on of the Israelites' voice, but her acting out of the words that the text gives to the Israelites suggested that what they said was obviously an excuse. Tracy's comment further explores the idea that the reason they give for making the golden calf was a transparent excuse, like the transparency of an excuse in slapstick routine where the audience is in on the joke. Surely, Andrea's impersonation suspends the seriousness of the discussion and explores the humor that the other world of the text suggests to her.

The Mysterion women were also apt to use their imaginations to poke fun at the disciples and their continual confusion about what Jesus was trying to teach them. Again,

³⁰⁹ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, April 15, 2010.

entering into the world of the text leads to imagining the world of the text differently than it is actually represented and to purposeless but hilarious impersonations of the disciples.

Christina: Well the other part of that is this wasn't written as it was happening. It's not like someone ran off to the side and recounted this conversation. *(laughter)* "Jesus was really confusing today"...*(laughter)*

Diane: These are actually diary passages. *(laughter)*

Christina: *(in mock diary voice)* "Peter thinks he has an idea of what Jesus meant but he could be wrong."

Diane: *(in hang-dog voice)* "Maybe he'll like us better tomorrow." *(laughter)*³¹⁰

Christina's suggests that part of the reason that Jesus's statement about "the yeast of the Pharisees" is confusing might be that some of what Jesus said might have been lost or misunderstood because of being recounted from memory. Her comment points to the absurdity of the idea of someone writing down these events as they happened, absurd both because the disciples could not know how important these events would be and also perhaps because of the clash between modern-day reporting techniques and what Christina imagines as typical behavior in 1st-century Palestine.

This sense of the distance between what the women are able to imagine because of their position in the present day and what the characters in the text could see provoked playful impersonation in another *Mysterion* conversation as well. This discussion in the *Mysterion* group developed in response to a debate between Jesus and the Sadducees, a Jewish group that rejected the resurrection of the dead, on the meaning of the resurrection.

Kelly: ...[The Sadducees] think that the meaning of resurrection is that you're just alive again in the same way that you were before. They're not stupid, they just don't know.

Christina: I do think it's interesting that Jesus doesn't talk about his own resurrection here. There have been three passion predictions already and here they're wanting actually to talk about the resurrection and he doesn't...

Diane: *(as if said by Jesus)* "You just wait." *(raucous laughter)* "It's going to blow your face off...It's going to be awesome."

Christina: *(laughing)* "It's going to be awesome."

³¹⁰ *Mysterion* meeting, December 15, 2009.

Sarah: “Not so much for me, but...” (*more laughter*)

Laura: “But you’re going to be soooo glad.”

(*laughter dies down*)

Christina: Y’all are funny.

Kelly: Don’t put that in your paper, that we were joking about the resurrection.³¹¹

Kelly’s final comment suggests that she feels a tension between the reverence that the women feel for the text and the imaginative practices of their discussions. The self-consciousness that Kelly references about the taping of their conversations was unusual and was most probably prompted by the fact that I had called attention to the tape recorder at the beginning of the meeting for the benefit of Lisa, a new member of the group. It had been several months since I had begun attending and taping the Mysterion conversations and the group had before this seemed to forget that I was taping at all. Nonetheless, Kelly’s comment indicates that she does not understand the playful impersonation in this conversation to have religious significance and perhaps that the laughter in the discussion is at odds with her understanding of the religious purpose of their discussions. Although I agree with her that these kinds of playful imaginative practices are not aimed at producing religious effects or shaping religious perspectives, I am arguing that the imaginative practices are the foundation of the Mysterion and Breathing Space groups’ discussions of these texts. The laughter and play that erupts into their discussions is the result of their practices of entering the world of the text and playing with other modes of being than their own.

The Subjectivity at Play with Others: Imagination Vs. Identification

I return, then, to the opposition that I set forth at the beginning of this chapter, the opposition between the language of identification that is used colloquially and in studies of women who read fiction and the terminology of imaginative practice. As I mentioned in the

³¹¹ Mysterion meeting, January 26, 2010. Quotation used with additional permission from Kelly, received by email May 16, 2013.

introduction, readers may use the term “identify” imprecisely to describe a number of relationships and experiences while reading. If asked, the readers of the Thursday Breathing Space and Mysterion groups might describe identifying with biblical characters in terms of sympathy or empathy based on the recognition of something familiar, exemplary, or simply particularly vivid about the characters in the text. The term “identification” as it is imported into scholarly analysis relies on these kinds of reports about readers’ relationships in order to evaluate the effects of reading texts that are deemed dangerous to women’s subjectivity in some way. For instance, Janice Radway and Lynn Neal evaluate how women relate to secular and evangelical romance novels respectively at least in part because of the concern that these novels might be detrimental to women because of the depictions of patriarchal gender relations they contain. More recently, Amy Johnson Frykholm interviewed male and female readers of the *Left Behind* series and responds to the criticisms of the series by religious and secular commentators who assume “that *Left Behind* is a pernicious presence in the cultural scene.”³¹² I want to argue here that, like the reading practices associated with biblical narratives I have analyzed in this chapter, some of the features of reading romance novels and apocalyptic fiction as they are described by Radway, Neal, and Frykholm are better explained as playful imaginative practices than as “identification.” In other words, the playfulness of reading fiction can escape the logic of cause and effect that haunts terms like “identification” when such terms are used to evaluate whether women are shaped by the subjectivities they take on when they read.

In her classic study *Reading the Romance*, Radway says that the women romance readers that she interviewed admitted that they projected themselves into the heroines in the novels they read. On this basis and on the basis of their evaluations of what were good and

³¹² Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, 175.

bad romances, she argues that romance novels are compensatory literature in which the readers vicariously experience through the heroine the feeling of being “deeply appreciated and tenderly cared for by another.”³¹³ While Radway seems to have picked up the language of identification and projection from her consultants, the language of vicarious experience in her analysis could be understood as the process of imaginatively taking on the subjectivity of the heroine. Using Ricoeur’s language, these romance readers would be imagining the possible world in which one is the object of a courtship rather and momentarily setting aside their own subjectivities as housewives. Indeed, Radway stresses that the women value the ways in which the lives of the heroines are *different* from the readers’ lives and how the function of “escape” in the women’s reading practices is facilitated by this distance.³¹⁴ Rather than a practice of taking on the perspectives of characters as models for what these women want in their lives, these women seem to be imagining themselves differently through the characters in romance novels and suspending who they are in their real life relationships as they do so. In reading romances, reading is an access to another world where women themselves become “unreal” for the duration of their visit.

Lynn Neal’s study of readers of the evangelical romance genre called inspirational fiction is somewhat closer to the kind of reading in the *Mysterion* and *Breathing Space* groups in that the women in *Romancing God* are reading for religious edification as well as for pleasure. In her analysis, Neal describes one of the religious effects of reading evangelical romances as assuring the readers of “God’s never-ending romance and unconditional love,” which seems to be similar to taking on the subjectivity of one being

³¹³ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 93.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

loved and cared for by Radway's readers, albeit with a religious inflection.³¹⁵ Yet when discussing how her consultants engage with the heroines in the text, Neal adopts a logic of identification that is predicated on finding oneself in the text. Neal says that the women in her study identify with the heroines in the text based on shared gender, evangelical identity and commitments to family, yet they are inspired by the heroines when the evangelical faith of the heroines is more perfect than their own. Neal describes this process through a logic of sameness and difference, which is "characterized by both proximity and distance" and in which "reader identification becomes religious inspiration."³¹⁶ While I do not doubt that Neal's readers measured themselves against the models of evangelical piety they found in the heroines and were encouraged in their faith as a result, I argue that it seems possible that what Neal describes as process of identification and inspiration is another version of the imaginative variation of subjectivities in which the *Mysterion* and *Breathing Space* groups engage. Furthermore, seeing the way that evangelical women relate to evangelical romance as a playful imaginative practice does not require evaluating the religious effects of these women's reading practices or emphasizing how evangelical women might use these texts to shape their own religious subjectivities outside of the influence of clergy.

Frykholm's analysis of the reading practices of a diverse sampling of *Left Behind* readers emphasizes the ways that readers "are actively working out what it means to be religious, to be human, and to live in a human society, and they are using the material around them, including texts, to do this."³¹⁷ Frykholm directly confronts critiques of mass culture that totalize the audience and assume that readers passively consume the patriarchal visions of the world that are presented in apocalyptic fiction. Her informants did not read through

³¹⁵ Lynn Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*, 165.

³¹⁶ Lynn Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*, 137.

³¹⁷ Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, 186

the lens of gender, but rather imagined themselves as the strong characters in the narratives. One female reader “identified” with the main male character saying, “I could just see myself in his situation.”³¹⁸ For Frykholm, the ability to “identify” with multiple characters in the text is evidence of the way readers use apocalyptic fiction in order to strengthen their faith. Frykholm also notices how readers playfully read “the signs of the times” in global political events after reading *Left Behind*. Yet, rather than see this playfulness as an exercise of imagination, Frykholm says that this is evidence of how “*Left Behind* does its work, seeping into readers’ lives and taking tangible form among practices.”³¹⁹ Like the readers of biblical narrative in my study, readers of apocalyptic fiction seem to imagine themselves in the world of the text, but Frykholm’s analysis seems to look for and focus on the indirect effects of this imaginative practice on the readers themselves in order to highlight the agency of *Left Behind* readers.

Providing an alternative understanding of how readers relate to characters in a text, my analysis of the way that the Mysterion and Thursday Breathing Space groups highlights that the first step in engaging religious narratives passes through the imagination, a place where the purposeful interaction with the world of cause and effect takes a pause. There are aspects of the practice of reading biblical narrative in these groups that may foreground the exercise of the imagination more than is possible in the practices that Radway, Neal, and Frykholm describe and analyze. Firstly, if reading narratives invites the “imaginative variations” of subjectivity, narratives that contain more characters and more types of subjectivities would provide more opportunities for imaginatively entering different possible subjectivities. Here the ideological content of apocalyptic fiction or evangelical romance

³¹⁸ Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, 93.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 151.

novels might be exercising its force by limiting the range of subjectivities available to a reader. In contrast, biblical narratives might offer more of a range of subjectivities (though still often exclusively male) and certainly offers more ambiguous subjectivities than simply good or bad moral exemplars. Nonetheless, as I demonstrate in the *Mysterion* and *Breathing Space* discussions about how the Israelites or the disciples *could* have acted, readers are not necessarily limited by what the text offers them, once the practice of imagining an alternative world is engaged.

The other difference between the practices of reading that Radway, Neal, and Frykholm present and the reading practices I describe in this chapter is that the women in my study are reading the biblical narratives in groups, in the presence of other readers, rather than individually. The dynamic of group discussions seems to enhance the free play of possibilities for imagining the world of text, even as an individual's ability to be completely absorbed in the world of the text might be hindered. Readers who engage texts on their own do not have other readers proposing alternative ways to enter the text and furthermore discussions with others about a text does provoke moments of "reflection" in which participants discuss the significance of the text. As I mentioned before, Ricoeur's statement that reading is a place where "reflection takes a pause" may have been based on his imagining of reading as a solitary enterprise. Elizabeth Long intended her study of book clubs in Houston to counter the tendency to see reading as solitary activity rather than a significant component of civil society. Her analysis of the secular book clubs she attended is much closer to the descriptions I have given of the groups in my study who read biblical narratives than the descriptions of Radway, Neal, Frykholm. Long discusses at length the

centrality of characters and the need be able to imagine the characters as real in her groups' discussions in terms that resemble my analysis here.

“What I am suggesting here is that reading groups offer the possibility of inhabiting other subjectivities. Each individual brings and discusses her experience of the book, hears others' experiences of the book, and also hears related accounts of other members' personal experiences.”³²⁰

In addition, while Long does not explore the import of playfulness in discussions as I have here, she notes that many of the book club groups she interviewed described the tone of their meetings as “playful.”³²¹ Long's observations suggest that the imaginative playfulness of *Mysterion* and *Breathing Space*'s discussions may be intensified when they read biblical narratives together and have the opportunity to enter the imaginative worlds that their co-participants conjure through the world of the text.

This possibility—that it is not only the narrative features of the texts under discussion but also the presence of other women that engender the practice of imagining oneself in the world of the text—brings me to the style of engagement with the other and the modality of agency that are represented in the practice of imagining oneself in the other world of the text. On a basic level the other world of the text provides the space in which to play and the joined imaginations of the other women expand this space. The provision of this space nurtures the imaginative capacities of the self by activating the imagination and this initial opening up possibilities is necessary for the exercise of the imagination itself, even if the imagination is eventually able to exceed the boundaries of the sandbox that the text provides. Ultimately, providing the space in which to exercise the imagination also nurtures the individual capacity for action since the ability to project and imagine possible actions is indispensable to the exercise of agency.

³²⁰ Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, 152.

³²¹ *Ibid*, 145.

The connection between imagination and action should not necessarily lead us back into evaluating the practice of imaginative variation in religious reading as enabling religious women to act in ways that shape their own subjectivities and produce effects in the real social worlds these women inhabit. What I am highlighting in the connection between the practice of the imagination and action is the modality of agency that contains the potentialities of action, rather than action itself. Ricoeur's discussion of the relationship between the imagination and action brings out potentiality and the free play of possibilities as an integral component to acting. In "Imagination in Discourse and Action," Ricoeur asserts that imagination is essential to acting "in several different ways: on the level of projects, on the level of motivations, and on the level of the very power to act."³²² In these three ways that imagination and action are intertwined, the language of possibility is inescapable in Ricoeur's description.

"And it is indeed through the anticipatory imagination of acting that I 'try out' different possible courses of action and that I 'play' in the precise sense of the word, with possible practices...Next, imagination is involved in the very process of motivation. It is imagination that provides the milieu, the luminous clearing, in which we can compare and evaluate motives as diverse as desires and ethical obligations, themselves as disparate as professional rules, social customs, or intensely personal values....This form of the practical imaginary finds its linguistic equivalent in expressions such as 'I would do this or that, if I wanted to.'...Finally, it is in the realm of the imaginary that I try out my power to act, that I measure the scope of 'I can.' I impute my own power to myself, as the agent of my own action, only by depicting it to myself in the form of imaginative variations on the theme 'I could,' even 'I could have done otherwise, if I had wanted to.'"³²³

Ricoeur's description includes potentiality and the free play of possibilities at each stage of action and offers us an understanding of a component to agency that is not directly visible in the actions themselves or in their effects. The possibility of "I could" or even "I could otherwise" exists as the shadow side of every exercise of agency. Therefore, the women in

³²² Paul Ricoeur, "Imagination in Discourse and Action" in *From Text to Action*, 177.

³²³ *Ibid*, 177-178.

Breathing Space and Mysterion groups could be widening the potentialities and capacities for being agentive subjects through the imaginative play of subjectivities in their reading practices. Without acting in terms of direct effects on their religious subjectivities, the imaginative variation between different characters, or even the different possible modes of being of one character in the case of Pilate, is crucial to nurturing the potentiality of agency.

In addition to Ricoeur's emphasis on role of the imagination in providing space for the potentialities necessary to action, Ricoeur's account of the relationship between imagination and action is distinct from other accounts in that the agentic power of the imagination is not tied to the imagination's ability to create something new. Ricoeur comes to the connection between imagination and action through fiction's power "to open and unfold new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of belief in an earlier description."³²⁴ When we suspend our belief in our current description of the world, the fictional narrative generates new descriptions and our own capacity to describe the world and to produce new images of it is put on hold. In other words, these new dimensions of reality are contained in the narratives that fiction provides and thus the imagination is given something to explore by the narrative. The creative power of the imagination actually requires the given-ness of fiction's new description of reality in order to imagine an alternative to the "earlier description" of reality. Thus, in some respects the bounded-ness of the possibilities that are offered in the biblical narratives, or even in evangelical romance novels or in apocalyptic fiction, is necessary in order to be able to even enter the world of the text and imagine a world otherwise.

For example, Ricoeur's account of the connection between the imagination and action differs significantly from Lois McNay's use of the imagination to explain how individuals

³²⁴ Ricoeur, "Imagination in Discourse and Action," 175.

act in innovative and unexpected ways.³²⁵ McNay is concerned with providing a generative account for the subject and the grounds for agency as an alternative to the negative paradigms in which the subject is formed “through an originary act of constraint.”³²⁶ To this end, she draws on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who argues “that identity is formed not around a lack, *pace* Lacan, but around an originary capacity for figuration,” in order to provide “an ontological account of the agent’s capacity for creative and autonomous behavior.”³²⁷ This originary capacity for figuration is described as the capacity to create *ex nihilo* or “the faculty of presenting or positing things and relations that do not exist.”³²⁸ While the capacity to posit things and relations that do not exist is certainly part of the imagination, especially when one considers the powers of the imagination in creating fictional narratives. Nonetheless, Ricoeur’s account of the role of imagination in action is not focused on the imagination’s ability to posit something from nothing but the ability to posit anything at all, whether new or old. The ability to project possibilities for action does not require those potential actions to be innovative or to be even capable of having any effects at all. The practice of imagining oneself in the world of biblical narrative can activate the potentialities of agency without having effects in the “real” world.

The modality of agency that exercises the potentiality of agency, therefore, also entails a style of engagement the other in which the self is drawn outwards into relationship with an other even if that other is imaginary, in this case the other subjectivities in the world of the text and the other possibilities for subjectivity that the other women in the group contribute to discussion. The “real” self is set aside so that another possible self can be taken

³²⁵ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*, 154.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

³²⁷ *Ibid*, 118.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 135, 137.

up and the self can play at being this other. The capacity for being a subject in this case is not necessarily located in the self but located in relationship with an other.

Similarly to what I have been arguing, Cynthia Willett argues that “moral philosophers need to move beyond the narrow liberal focus on autonomy” to a view in which “individuals flourish only through their relationships.”³²⁹ Willett draws on the “visionary pragmatism” of African-American authors Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West in order to craft a vision in which relationships with others are not defined as external to individual identity and in which harm is understood to be the abrogation of the capacity for relationship, not necessarily the capacity for reflection or autonomy. In particular, Willett draws on Lorde’s essay “The Uses of the Erotic” to explain a vision in which the core of a person is not “the cognitive capacity for reflection per se, but an ‘erotic’ capacity for creative work and meaningful social bonds.”³³⁰ This vision of the relationship between the self and the other as located in the same place as an individual’s power for creativity supports my suggestion that there is a link between the modality of agency that is exercised by imagining other possibilities of being a self and the self’s engagement with an other. For Willett, Lorde’s location of an erotic capacity at the core of the self modifies the basic direction of the psyche from turning inward in the liberal view, “to reflect upon one’s motives and beliefs.”³³¹ For Lorde, “the individual grows as a person from a creative engagement that begins with, and culminates in, relationships with others...As Lorde explains, the Greek term ‘eros’ names, not a turn inward, but a centrifugal pull of the

³²⁹ Cynthia Willett, “Visionary Pragmatism and the Ethics of Connectivity: An Alternative to Autonomy” in *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, ed. Maurice Hamington and Celia N. Bardwell Jones, 262-263.

³³⁰ Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence: Freedom in Analytic, Postmodern, and Pragmatist Feminisms,” 122; Willett is describing Audre Lorde’s essay “The Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984).

³³¹ Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence,” 122.

self outwards.”³³² While I would be reticent to call the imaginative entering into the world of the text as “a relationship with an other” in the sense that Lorde and Willett mean here. Nevertheless, they indicate the potential value in being drawn outside of one’s self and allowing one’s own subjectivity to take a pause in the process of imaginatively entering the world of the text.

The possibility in the practice of playfully imagining oneself in biblical narratives is that women grow in their selfhood through this practice even though they do not exercise “agency” in the sense that they act in the real world and the playful reading practice does not have obvious effects on their religious subjectivities. In addition, the potential and imaginative dimension of agency can be missed as a modality of agency when scholars look for the “effects” of particular texts or subjectivities represented in religious texts on religious women. Finally, the playfulness in tension with “serious” religious goals that is evident in the *Mysterion* and Thursday Breathing Space groups’ discussions of biblical narratives reminds us that sometimes we need to just let play be play.

³³² Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence,” 122.

Chapter Four: Defining Boundaries Through Reading Religious Others

*“A theory of the other” is but another way of phrasing a “theory of the self.”*³³³

Up until now, my analysis of the relationship between self and other in the formation of the religious subject in women’s reading practices has sidestepped the important issue of how the women themselves conceive of who is the other and who is the self. On the whole, they do not understand their own religious perspectives as “other,” even if they sometimes perceive distance between ideal religious perspectives and their own, as I argued in chapter two. In my preceding chapters, I have identified the other as that which derives from social sources and is conceived, at least in traditional theories of the subject, to be exterior to the self; namely I treated religion itself and religious perspectives as the “other” in order to argue that engagement with an “other” produces modalities of agency that cannot be mapped onto autonomy or heteronomy.³³⁴ In this chapter, however, I shift the lens of my analysis to look for the ways that the women in the groups I attended define who is “other” and how they understand the boundary between religious outsiders and religious insiders. Therefore, the analysis that I offer in this chapter will serve as a reminder that how scholars define who or what is external to the self and what counts as “the other” is not self-evident and often serves scholarly ends (as opposed to the ends of the research consultants). In other words, the particularities of and contexts within which religious identities are formed matter in any

³³³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 276.

³³⁴ I do not mean to suggest that interior dispositions are more authentically originating in the self by drawing this distinction, since I agree with most strong constructivists that many aspects of our deepest selves that appear our own are actually socially derived. My analysis in the preceding chapters draws this stark dichotomy between religion as other and individuals as self to argue that there are vestiges of the dichotomy of a social exterior superimposed on an authentic interior self in the feminist treatment of religious subjectivity.

attempt to evaluate the agency of religious women.

Since I selected the groups that I attended for their different group identities and social locations, the specific definitions of insider and outsider used in each group were different and sometimes mirrored opposites. For instance, the white evangelical women in the Breathing Space groups drew a strict boundary between believers who had a conversion experience and outsiders (including other Christians) who engage in “legalism” to try to get to God. For these women, liberal Protestants who decline to use the language of conversion are outside the boundary of Christianity. Yet at the same time, the white liberal Protestant women in the Dames and the Divine distance themselves from Christians who draw such a strict boundary between insiders and outsiders and who do not hold inclusivity as the primary ideal in their own definitions of Christianity. In contrast to both of these white groups, the African-American women members of the Quinn Temple group define their Christianity pragmatically; for them the boundary between insiders and outsiders is somewhat fluid, since anyone could be a help or a hindrance to the personal and social change that they seek.

Nonetheless, having stated that the contexts of the formation of religious subjectivity matter, there are limits to the detail with which I can adumbrate how each group is situated in a particular context. In this chapter, I walk a fine line between describing the way that these groups are typical of their respective African-American, white evangelical, and white liberal Christian orientations and describing the idiosyncrasies that distinguish these groups from their larger affiliations in Protestant Christianity and that distinguish individual women from the perspectives of others in the groups they attend. For example, the Quinn Temple group shares some features with other African-American denominational churches, but there are significant differences between this very small church and very large churches in the same

denomination. Ultimately, the boundaries between religious insiders and religious outsiders are shaped by and sometimes completely defined by the larger institutional and cultural discourses in which these women are situated.³³⁵ I can draw some lines between the groups in my study and scholarship on these varieties of American Protestantisms, yet to trace the “effects” or “implementation” of the discourses would lead me back into the trap of trying to perceive whether or not the women resist these discourses or appropriate them with or without modification. These discourses that circulate in larger institutional contexts would again take on the role of the “other,” and I would be evaluating these women’s agency on the basis of whether or not they protect their authentic selves from the pernicious effects of influences that come to them from the outside.

That is not to say that I could not find instances of individual agency in relationship to larger denominational structures, especially in the case of Jamie at Quinn Temple, who narrated many of her interactions with and opinions about her denomination during the group meetings. Nonetheless, I am convinced that it is more useful to evaluate the discourses themselves of boundary-making between the Christian self and religious outsiders rather than ascertaining their source. From this perspective, I found differences in these groups’ sense of whether and how the “other” or religious outsider is considered a threat to the religious self, as well as differences in the degree to which the religious self should be involved in the

³³⁵ An analysis of these institutional discourses would necessarily include an analysis of how Christian publishing participates in and sometimes shapes the slices of the Christian readership that they target. See Daniel Vaca’s forthcoming *Book People: Evangelical Books and the Making of Contemporary Evangelicalism* for the role of religious publishing in shaping the meaning of who is an “evangelical.” I find many of Adorno’s essays on the way that the cultural administration in capitalism constrains and shapes the “choices” available to us compelling, and the relative invisibility of these forces in shaping individuals’ experiences of reality is concerning. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). However, the desire to trace these exterior forces still becomes muddied with the assumption that these market forces constrain the agency of individuals and therefore need to be demarcated in order to identify agency that might exist in the remainder.

public domain. In other words, I found a correlation between difficulties with or concerns about religious others and conceptions of religion that limit religion to interior realms of belief. In particular, the feminist-identified liberal Protestant women in my study, who prized the inclusion of religious outsiders the most, also struggled the most to reconcile their understanding of religion as properly relegated to the private sphere with the existence of religious others who were perceived to be outside that definition of religion, like Muslims. The Breathing Space groups, while not at all feminist-identified, shared this interiorized sense of authentic religion and the sense that religious outsiders might be a threat to religious insiders. Yet the Breathing Space groups' preoccupation with policing the boundary between who is really a Christian and who is not was directed at *those already on the inside*, which means that other forms of Christianity were considered more of a threat than non-Christian religious others. On the other hand, the Quinn Temple group and its pragmatic approach to outsiders fit comfortably with their not completely privatized notion of the religious self.

In the end, my argument is that the groups I attended are situated in different locations in relationship to the dominant American discourses about religious identity and represent different styles of engagement with religious others. Evaluating these particular locations and styles of engagement exposes the ways in which a privatized conception of the religious self is easily pressed into the service of marginalizing non-mainstream religious women. The fact that the boundaries the feminist-identified white liberal Protestant women in my study drew between insiders and outsiders coincided with feminism and concerns about religion in the public sphere, especially in the case of Islam, illustrates the way that privatized notions of religion circulate in lay feminism. In these discourses, non-dominant religious women are marked as religious others and any part of religious identity that seems

to enter into the public sphere or even any outward form of performance as primary versus something inward marks it as suspect (and public).³³⁶ I am arguing that by treating religious difference as irrelevant as a factor in the social shaping of the subject alongside race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, feminist scholarship participates in a system in which only those whose religion is appropriately private and interiorized enjoy the status of being unmarked by religious difference. In essence, it becomes a privilege to treat one's religious identity as a private religion, since as soon as religious difference even becomes visible it is no longer private. This is not to lift up the other ways of conceiving religious others in the groups I attended as ideal, especially since the evangelical boundaries between insiders and outsiders also participate in the ideal of privatized religion, but to show that what seems like a natural way to define the boundaries between properly and improperly religious is not in fact natural. Furthermore, some styles of defining the boundary between religious insiders and outsiders, between self and other, and between religious and secular are more detrimental to engagement with the other, especially non-mainstream others.

Finally, a note about reading and interpretation. This chapter deals with a practice of interpretation that is not necessarily the product of an interaction with a text. Throughout their discussions, the women in these groups define their own group identity and interpret their own group's relationship to religious others in response to issues that are raised in the texts that they read or in general conversation. In other words, the term "reading" applies to this aspect of the discussion only loosely and therefore these practices of interpretation are the least tied to a genre of text of those in the dissertation. Certain kinds of books can encourage this genre of conversation more than others, as did Krista Tippett's *Speaking of*

³³⁶ Demonstrating this bias against exterior forms of religion is a large part of Saba Mahmood's argument in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Faith for the Dames and the Divine group, but such topics entered into the discussions unbidden by the text as well.³³⁷ The practice of defining religious others is a feature of these women's conversations because it is a feature their religious and cultural lives in which they must read the cultural and religious landscape around them.

In each group, their stance towards religious outsiders was inseparable from the group's definition of what it meant to be a Christian. As many theorists have argued, in the majority of cases the task of defining who is the "other" is the same task as defining the boundaries of the self.³³⁸ Therefore, I engage the content of each group's ideas about what it means to be a Christian as opposed to restricting myself to describing the formal characteristics of the practice of drawing boundaries in each group. This is a departure from my approach in my earlier chapters and contains no discussion of the interpretive practices in play in these conversations. Nonetheless, there are many examples of sharing and resonating with personal narratives and lots of struggling with doctrine in the conversations I have excerpted below. I have also described some of the formal characteristics of the boundaries drawn by each group, for instance whether or not the boundary is firm or flexible. However, these characteristics of boundary-making turn out to be less important than who ends up on the inside and who ends up on the outside when the boundary is drawn.

Bringing the Outside In Quinn Temple

As a small church with roughly 50 in attendance each Sunday, there were many more people outside Quinn Temple than inside. As if to compensate for this fact, the Quinn

³³⁷ Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters and How to Talk About It* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

³³⁸ See two of Jonathan Z. Smith's essays for this idea: "Differential Equations On Constructing the Other" and "What a Difference a Difference Makes" in *Relating Religion: Essays on the Study of Religion*.

Temple group's discussions were often oriented towards those outside in the community as if they were inside the church. In other words, it often seemed as if there was no boundary between the church and the neighborhood because the church was so active in the community. I got the sense that Jamie thought of the entire neighborhood as her 'parish.' Jamie is the kind of pastor who checked in on the guys who spent their days on the corner near the church. She is on the community advisory board for the elementary and middle schools that were in walking distance of the church, and she regularly volunteered her time in the classroom at the elementary school. I even saw her purchase coats for individual students and drop them off at school. The church also runs a summer camp program that is a conduit for free lunches in the summer. Mrs. Edmond was a retired school principal and also spent several hours every week tutoring children at the Boys and Girls Club. The conversations before the study regularly turned to issues that were affecting the area schools even though none of the women in the group had children in these schools. For instance, Mrs. Edmond once asked for prayer for the neighboring county's school district because she felt that people had lost sight of the good of the children.³³⁹ The concerns of the community were the concerns of those in the church regardless of whether or not the affected individuals were part of the church.

The Quinn Temple group's concern for the good of the community also fostered the ability and desire to work across racial and religious boundaries. In terms of race, while I was always accepted warmly at Quinn Temple, discussions about race may have been avoided because of my presence as a white woman. Nonetheless, I observed interactions with white community leaders, such as the leader of the Boy Scout troupe who met at the church and the organizer of the community garden down the street, that proceeded naturally and easily.

³³⁹ Quinn Temple meeting, October 21, 2009.

Furthermore, there was a sprinkling of white people who attended the congregation from time to time, some of whom had become acquainted with the church through shared activist work with Jamie. The church did not engage in significant interfaith activities while I was attending, but when the question of how to engage persons of other religions arose there was a willingness to find common ground through working for the good of the community. In a conversation about whether or not Christianity is “reasonable,” Rhonda asked about our experiences of sharing our faith with others, and everyone was reticent to espouse the kind of outreach that would seek to convince others of the reasonableness of Christianity. Rhonda was critical of a combative approach to dealing with other religions, especially in the case of Islam. She compared what people are doing to Islam to how Christians had been persecuted in early Christianity. Mrs. Edmond’s response, excerpted below, was pragmatic and ultimately placed working together for the community above any concerns about what one believes.

Mrs. Edmond: The other thing too that I think, whatever is your belief or whatever is your faith background, whatever it’s built on, then what I want to talk about is in activating your faith can we both agree that feeding the hungry is a good thing, and does your faith allow you, encourage you to activate it and to do those things that need to be done to make this world better. So we then get above who is here and there and what you believe, all I want to know is...

Rhonda: Can we serve people...

Mrs. Edmond: Yeah, and are you jealous of what other people have? Are you going to talk about you goin’ to court, married folk goin’ to court? I mean, whatever is your faith do you endorse that kind of thing? And so we might have more in common when we start activating what we oughtta be able and what we oughtta oughtta be doing... So can each of us just on over here and study and get all of your beliefs and our exegesis? Doing all that, *then* we meet out on [the street in front of the church] and feed some folk, coming from our different whatever you believe, and I think that’s what it really oughtta boil down to.

Rhonda: Do you feel like that’s...that’s reasonable for your faith, what you just said?

Mrs. Edmond: Um-hmm, I really do think...cuz in the end we’re going to have to answer to did we go visit some folk in prison and what did you do, not really so much what did you believe, because your belief ought to be visible in your actions, so you can

believe whatever you want to believe³⁴⁰

In her last comment, Mrs. Edmond is referring to a passage in Matthew 25 where Jesus describes a scene of final judgment in which he accepts those who have fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited those in prison and he rejects those who have not. Through her reference, Mrs. Edmond signals that she considers such work to be at the core of her faith and is willing to work with anyone, Christian or not, who is working towards the same goals.

This pragmatism that Mrs. Edmond embraces in her comments about other religions was also evident in the group's approach to more internal matters of faith. It was clear from her response to Beth Moore's emphasis on believing God "to reach one's Gilgal," or Promised Land that Jamie considers issues of social justice to be matters for believing God and not just personal issues. In the comment below, Jamie explains how the religious outlook of believing God could affect one's approach to a social or political problem.

Jamie: If we believe God's love for us, even if it's something where the outcome could not be favorable, if we believe God then we don't have to be concerned about the fear. We can just act. The whole health care issue now, because people are fearful for their livelihoods, they don't want it for everyone because they are afraid. They are concerned about their own.³⁴¹

Here, Jamie's hope is that deeper individual personal transformation into "believing God" without fear might have a positive social outcome for the community at large. Also, the group had a pragmatic approach to personal transformation that often included a concern for the way that larger social issues affected the personal religious lives of the members of the group. One issue that was perennially discussed was Ashley's underemployment and how she needed more money to pay for a potential surgery. In talking about what it would mean

³⁴⁰ Quinn Temple meeting, February 10, 2010.

³⁴¹ Quinn Temple meeting, November 18, 2009, also quoted in chapter two.

to believe God and have ambitious prayers as Beth Moore suggested, Jamie encouraged Ashley to amplify her prayer for a job with more hours into a prayer for a job that would let her pay for school and her surgery.³⁴²

In terms of who was actually part of the church, the Quinn Temple group also adopted a pragmatic approach to navigating and accepting a lot of internal diversity. I have mentioned before that there were significant class and education differences among the women who attended the Quinn Temple group, evidenced by the different literacy levels of those who came regularly. Some of those educational differences might also have mapped onto different theological perspectives, especially for those with theological education (Jamie and Rhonda in particular) and those without. It is possible that drawing theological boundaries that might drive people away was not a luxury such a small community could afford. It is also possible that Jamie, as a female pastor in a tradition that is sometimes ambivalent about women in leadership positions, needed to champion theologies that supported her leadership role while simultaneously including more conservative theologies to make sure her authority was not open to questioning. Jamie openly talked about confronting the attitudes held by others in her denominational hierarchy that undercut the authority of women pastors. Furthermore, Jamie recognized her marginal position within the denomination by saying that she had a “girl congregation,” i.e., a church without the status of a big church with a large staff.³⁴³ Jamie’s willingness to conceive of her congregation and Christianity in general as a big tent might have been influenced by the recognition that if the

³⁴² Quinn Temple meeting, December 2, 2009.

³⁴³ Quinn Temple meeting, October 14, 2009. Research on women clergy supports Jamie’s analysis of her own position within her denomination in that women clergy as sole or senior pastors are more likely to be in small churches with precarious finances. See Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 29-30 for an overview.

tent were smaller, she might end up on the outside.

The conversation about Ashley's employment situation also led Jamie to give an example of a conflict in her own life that sheds light on how Jamie approaches conflict within the Christian community. In her story, Jamie again uses the language of allowing the devil to use you as a way to explain conflicts with those within the boundary of the Christian community who might not be behaving as they should.

Jamie: ...When I was at [seminary], this woman was my [pastoral internship] person, and I still can't believe the pastor put that woman as my [pastoral internship] person. ...So she writes in my file, after I told the pastor, "Don't put me with her," because she did not like me. But he put me with her anyways and I just tried to keep my mouth shut the whole time. And she writes, "This woman is not worthy of the calling which God put on her life." ("*Oh, wow*" responses from everyone)...I'm sittin' there and it was all I could do, I was barely saved, for 40 years I was barely saved, I just recently got good and saved right? (*chuckling responses*) So on so many levels I wanted grab her by her head! She was pregnant and I wanted to pull her hair like this and slam her down some stairs!...And I couldn't say nothing to her because it would've been worse! So [the pastor] gave me somebody else to come in and sit with us, right? The woman, while she's praying, I had to pray while she was praying. This woman praying over me saying, "Dear Lord, since she has such a cavalier spirit and something attitude..." This is while she prayin' over me! I was like, I cannot believe! So at that point I said, "Lord Jesus..." I had to go to another meeting afterwards, so I had to just sit there like this and start praying. It was *crazy*. ...So anyway, recently, a couple of times I've called where she works. And the person I was calling wasn't there and she answered the phone. And so I was like, (*in a cheery voice*) "Hey how you doing?" I'm going about my business, because that thing wasn't about me, that just wasn't about me. And I *knew* that she had allowed the devil to use her for a period of time. And she just broke down in tears crying, talking about the things that have been happening in her life and some things that she needed and what was going on in her household and asked if I could pray with her. We talked and we prayed. And several times since then we've talked and prayed, right? She said to me recently how in the midst of all the things that were going on in her life, how I was able to help her despite anything else that had ever happened, right? And so when we go off on people, when they messin' over us? We miss the opportunity to be who God has called us to be. And it may not be immediate, it may be years down the line. But we miss the opportunity to be who it is that God calls us to be. Now it's so much more fun to get people told, let me tell you. Would have been so much more fun if I slammed that woman down those steps! And I could have done it, that would have been a good story, right, if I throw that woman down with her pregnant self? (*laughter*) That could have been a good story, right? But that's not who it is that God deems for us to be, right? God intends for us, in the midst of all that crap, and she

knew she was dishing out crap, right, that I was able to be who it is that God wants me to be, so that she can be who it is God wants her to be.³⁴⁴

In suggesting that this conflict with her supervisor was like the conflict that Ashley was experiencing with her supervisor, Jamie implicitly says that people inside the Christian community and those outside the community should be treated in the same way when there are conflicts. Furthermore, by saying that this woman had allowed the devil to work through her for a time, Jamie is able to express her censure of this woman's behavior without questioning the woman's standing as inside the boundary of Christian community. In this example, we begin to see that Jamie's porous understanding of the boundary between insiders and outsiders does not require her to relinquish her expectations for normative behavior within the community.

A similar discussion arose after the Quinn Temple group had finished the Beth Moore video series and was deciding what to do next. The group was trying out a Bible study from a booklet of guided discussions, and one started with having us read the narrative of Saul's dramatic conversion on the Damascus road in Acts. In the course of the discussion, Mrs. Edmond told a story about how the church had stuck with a member who successfully overcame his alcoholism. With this example, the discussion turned to the difficulty in being welcoming without affirming behaviors that might be destructive to individuals and the community.

Mrs. Edmond: But what is the role of the church during that process of change? If a person is, um...not all that the Lord would have them be and continues to be in that place in their lives? And I guess we kind of help them or counsel them, but...

Jamie: (*interrupting*) I think we're supposed to be welcoming, encouraging, and open. I'm probably not going to say what my issues are if the people that I'm in relationship with, the people around me, or the people at church are not open to the possibilities of me changing or me being able to be helped, you know?

SLK: I think it can be subtle. Sometimes the actual actions, someone could do the same thing

³⁴⁴ Quinn Temple meeting, November 11, 2009.

like in the story that you were saying. The pastor could go to somebody and say, “You should step down from this.” Even say the same words perhaps. But if the belief behind it is not that this person can change, then it’s a different act. And it affects...people hear it differently.

Jamie: Exactly, and you hear it differently based on what your experience is with that group of people. If I’ve always been affirmed and encouraged, then when you tell me, “You need to do this this and this,” then I’m hearing that as encouragement and helping to move me forward. But if I’ve always been ridiculed or seen other people be that way or heard gossip and all that kind of stuff. So then when you say something to me, I’m like ok, they don’t expect anything out of me over here. Let me just fall by the way side. I think the responsibility of the church is always to be open and honest and welcoming. And when I say honest I mean you don’t just tolerate anything, you don’t deal with anything. I think there’s a way that you have a conversation with people that they know that while you’re welcome, some of those things you do are not. So how does our relationship that we have with one another help you to move in a direction God would have you to move. Which is a day by day process. It’s like raising kids, because each kid is different. What works for one doesn’t necessarily work for the other one. So I think that’s what the church has to do too...figure out how it is that you have different groups of people that work harmoniously together, all of the groups working for the same common purpose to enhance the lives of the people that are here but also to equip the people that are here to enhance the lives of the people they are in relationship with. Which is a really tall order.³⁴⁵

The discussion highlights Jamie’s firm commitment to erasing the barriers that keep people from joining the church, but it also makes clear that a church is a place where one is to be changed for the better. In this final example, Jamie critiques the way that churches’ concerns with decorum can create an unwelcoming environment.

Jamie: What does the text say? Jesus didn’t come...the doctor doesn’t come for those who are well, the doctor comes for those who are sick. The church is for the sinners, the church is for those who need Christ, who need to be transformed and change. Now our responsibility is to make the church a welcoming and inviting place where that can happen and where people can meet Christ. I think what happens is that we get caught up in what it is we should look like and what it is we should do, how it is that we should dress and what it is that we should say and how it is we should say it...It’s kind of like ushers. I said one time if I’m a pastor of a church, I’m not having any ushers, because ushers will...Ushers can make or break the church, right? You know somebody mean standing at the door not letting you in at the very moment when you need to come in the church? We want it to be orderly for us...If I’m keeping the doors closed for my convenience, cuz I don’t want to look at anybody, because it may distract me that someone comes walking down the center. If I keep the doors closed because that may distract me, what have I done to the very sick person who has come

³⁴⁵ Quinn Temple meeting, February 17, 2010.

in looking for healing? Because they don't understand that I could be distracted. If I am in worship with God and in communion with God, then the only distraction that should happen would be something that the Holy Spirit was giving me, so that shouldn't be...you know what I'm saying? I think as the church get too caught up about semantics and not enough about...

In many African-American churches, latecomers are permitted to enter the sanctuary at designated points during the service and the ushers indicate to those waiting to enter the sanctuary when it is time to enter and often help them to find seats. Jamie is clearly responding to an argument she has heard that this practice is to protect the focus of the preacher and other worshippers, but Jamie feels that the ushers serve as gatekeepers. Her rejection of this practice is emblematic of the high value she places on outsiders feeling welcome and of how she wants to remove anything that she sees as a potential barrier for newcomers. Indeed, Jamie's small church has a much more informal Sunday service than the nearby AME church with 6,000 members, where Jamie had done her pastoral internship.³⁴⁶ Not having ushers is just one of the ways that Quinn Temple, as a small community-oriented church, adopts a pragmatic approach towards drawing the boundary between insiders and outsiders so that as many people as possible can be on the inside.

While it is impossible to generalize about all African-American denominational churches from my sample of one small church, especially since women-led churches are statistically small in American Protestantism, the way that Jamie and Quinn Temple's pragmatism encompasses both private and public spheres of influence fits with scholarly descriptions of the black church more generally.³⁴⁷ Both early interpreters, like W.E.B. Du Bois, and more recent historians and sociologists, like Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and C.

³⁴⁶ This larger church has a list of church etiquette on its website, indicating how attendees should behave in the sanctuary.

³⁴⁷ Again see Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 29-30.

Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, have argued that the early black church was a social center as much as it was or even before it was a religious center of African-American life.³⁴⁸ Higginbotham, in particular, argues that “[t]he church connected black women’s spirituality integrally with social activism.”³⁴⁹ She describes the black church as creating a “counter-public” in which, through the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention, black women learned leadership, networking, and fundraising skills that they took with them into the secular club movement.³⁵⁰ Furthermore, Higginbotham argues that the activism and gendered-consciousness of black Baptist women led them to collaborate with white women on women’s issues alongside tirelessly working for racial uplift.

With the recent rise of black megachurches and black prosperity gospel preaching, some have questioned whether many black churches have retreated into a more “priestly” model, where religion is more concerned with the individual and otherworldly concerns, or whether it is even possible to speak of the black church in any unified way.³⁵¹ In her work *Righteous Content*, Daphne C. Wiggins collected oral histories from contemporary black churchwomen and found that the spirit of resistance that Higginbotham described seemed to

³⁴⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 205; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-19; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 7.

³⁴⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 16.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

³⁵¹ Much of this conversation has happened in essays on the internet. See “The Black Church is Dead” by Eddie Glaude, Jr. (February 24, 2010) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html. Accessed February 3, 2013. Also a roundtable of responses to his essay on www.religiondispatches.org titled, “The Black Church is Dead—Long Live the Black Church” (March 9, 2010) http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/2331/updated_with_response_the_black_church_is_dead_long_live_the_black_church/. Accessed February 3, 2013.

be less of a prominent feature of the faith of the women she interviewed.³⁵² Yet, in Higginbotham's analysis, black women's participation in the church transcends easy polarities and therefore tends "to blur the spiritual and the secular, the eschatological and the political, and the private and the public."³⁵³ Likewise, Jamie and her congregation's active involvement in their community and willingness to work with religious outsiders in the public sphere are continuing the black church tradition of civic engagement as an integral part of personal spirituality.

"Am I on the Inside?" at the Breathing Space Groups

The boundary between insider and outsider in Breathing Space's religious imaginary is not necessarily between Christian and non-Christian, but rather between believers and unbelievers. For both the Wednesday and Thursday Breathing Space groups, the boundary between believer and unbeliever runs through Christianity and possibly even through an individual church. The believer is someone who has had an individual and often emotional experience with Jesus Christ and someone who has been delivered from ineffective ways of approaching God like "legalism." This way of defining the boundary between insiders and outsiders means that some Christians and followers of non-Christian religions are alike in their placement outside of the boundary. Since this boundary does not perfectly coincide with traditional social group boundaries, the group must define this boundary with respect to whether or not individuals are believers or are "saved." In other words, the concern is with how to know whether one is within or outside the boundary of being a believer. The internal, individual and sometimes invisible nature of the boundary between inside and outsider means

³⁵² Daphne C. Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

³⁵³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 16.

that outsiders, both other Christians and followers of other religions, could potentially be on the inside, but it also means that the self is sometimes precariously within the boundary. Believers must then guard themselves against outside influences of which the most dangerous are misguided Christian influences, since non-Christian religious others are more obviously outside the boundary and in need of conversion.

The definition of inside and outside was the most clearly articulated during conversion narratives. As I mentioned in chapter 1, the Breathing Space groups sometimes designated women to share personal stories called “candid” as part of the gathering activity. While they were intended to be “snapshots” into what God was doing in these women’s lives, the majority of women shared their conversion stories. In these stories, the feature that stands out is a move from being involved in Christianity in some way to a more personal and emotional experience of God, which indicates crossing the boundary into “believer” status. Sharon had grown up Christian but spent most of her adult life disillusioned because of her parent’s divorce. When she returned to church looking for a place to raise her children in Christianity, she felt like the preacher was speaking directly to her. At the end of her story, Sharon read aloud a song that spoke about how Jesus had been wounded for me and became so emotional that she had to have another woman finish reading it.³⁵⁴ Angela had been attending a church regularly when she was listening to a Christian talk radio station and she felt like God was talking directly to her. She started crying and knew that a personal relationship with God was what she wanted. Notably, Angela felt like she then had to find a new church because her current church was not terribly “Bible-centered” in its teaching and she knew that she could not grow there.³⁵⁵ Nicole grew up “Catholic” but they never went to

³⁵⁴ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, October 21, 2009.

³⁵⁵ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, November 18, 2009.

church except for weddings and funerals and her parents would have freaked out if she had gone to a Christian church.³⁵⁶ She was confirmed in the Catholic Church as a college student and went to mass regularly. Eventually, she was invited to attend a Protestant Bible study by a coworker and began attending a Protestant evangelical church. But it was during an Ash Wednesday service that she just broke down crying and could not stop in response to a song that was being sung and she marked this as the beginning of her personal relationship with God.³⁵⁷

In all of these stories, being part of a church or even identifying as a Christian was insufficient for salvation and it was assumed that even though one has grown up in the church but not *really* become a Christian until later. In this way of making a distinction between Christians and true Christians or believers, the distinction is ultimately between a kind of socially-derived identity and an individually determined one. However, because the socially derived labels are not the true determinant of whether or not someone is a Christian those who have grown up in the church always have the potential to be believers along with those of other Christian denominations. For instance, Sharon mentioned in her conversion story that they went to a Catholic church first because her husband had grown up Catholic and in her telling it was awful. But she quickly added that she meant no offense to Catholics and that she was sure there were some great Catholic Christians out there.³⁵⁸

In her study on Romans, Vicky was explicit about the possibility of being a part of a Christian group and not really being a Christian. In this comment she made about her goal in

³⁵⁶ Nicole used air quotes around the word Catholic, but not around the word Christian. From this comment, Nicole seems to place a distinction between Catholicism and Christianity, which others in the group were loath to do as I will explain below.

³⁵⁷ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, November 18, 2009.

³⁵⁸ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, October 21, 2009.

teaching the study of Romans, it was clear that for her becoming a Christian “by osmosis” is not sufficient.

Vicky: Maybe for some of us, we’ve gone through the rituals, the rites of Christianity. We’ve grown up in the church and we’ve sort of become Christians by osmosis, or by culture. That’s very common. And even if that isn’t true for you, if you have had a genuine conversion experience, I hope this makes it clearer, and that you are able to communicate it to your children, to your friends and neighbors and family much more clearly.”³⁵⁹

Furthermore, Vicky read the message of Romans as one of being delivered from the inability to fulfill God’s law and therefore freed to actually fulfill the law through Jesus and she tied the experience of this deliverance to the boundary of those who are truly Christians and those who only have some kind of socially derived Christian identity.³⁶⁰ The example below began with a story about her son and husband encountering a shiny hot rod car on a used car lot that had no engine.

Vicky: How many of us...I won’t say us. How many people do you think sit in church week after week and we look like Christians. On the outside, we are the best thing since sliced bread and we fit the mold, but there’s no power, there’s no engine. And why? Because we’re not filled with the spirit. We’re not walking in the spirit. That car was the perfect price but it didn’t do the job. And we can fit the mold, but we may not have power to be what God intended us to be. I know that’s a cruel illustration, but it’s pretty vivid, right? God says that once he puts his engine in me, the Holy Spirit, I can go. I can fulfill the law because God himself is doing in us what he desires. He puts that engine back into us that was taken from the Fall. What is the contrast then that he’s drawing in these verses?...We saw the contrast in our listing...

Tanya: The control of the sinful nature versus the control of the spirit.

Vicky: Yes. He contrasts the saved, those who are in the spirit and who? The lost. Those who are in the flesh. Now why do you think I would label those in the flesh as being lost? (*Pause*) Because they have no engine?! You cannot have the spirit living in you and live in the flesh. You cannot. That is a natural impossibility. And we emphasized that a few chapters back. You cannot, and we see it in chapter 7, it’s not about a Christian who just can’t get their act together. That’s an oxymoron. You can’t do that. You are

³⁵⁹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 17, 2010.

³⁶⁰ I do not dispute Vicky’s reading of Romans, which is doubtlessly shared by many interpreters. By identifying this reading as Vicky’s, I only want to signal that I do not intend here to wade into the vast interpretive scholarship on Romans.

either living a life increasingly doing what God leads you to do. If the spirit is in you, you cannot walk in the flesh.³⁶¹

In this example, there is no room for ambiguity; either you are a Christian who has personally experienced God's "engine" enabling you to live as you ought or you are outside the boundary and therefore cannot be a true Christian. The boundary must be starkly drawn and regularly sitting in church does not make that boundary more flexible. Scholars have long remarked on evangelicals' "strong sense of boundaries that distinguish themselves from non-Christians and non-evangelical Christians" alike.³⁶² The Breathing Space groups are like other evangelicals in their efforts to maintain a sense of distinctiveness from others who are encompassed out there in "the world."³⁶³

In the Breathing Space groups I attended, the term "legalism" helped to mark the boundary between religious insiders and religious outsiders. This term was used in the Breathing Space groups to describe a false religious approach in which one attempts to follow rules as a method of approaching God, in opposition to an emotional experience of being delivered from the need to follow rules like those in the conversion stories above. Throughout her study of Romans, Vicky used the ineffectiveness of following the law as a way to explain the placement of all of those on the outside, Christians and followers of non-Christian religions alike, beyond the boundary of believer/unbeliever. Vicky explained that Paul's audience in the book of Romans was a group of Jewish Christians who were

³⁶¹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, April 21, 2010.

³⁶² Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 124-125. See also Jon R. Stone, *On the boundaries of American Evangelicalism: the postwar Evangelical coalition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), for a description of drawing distinctions between themselves and fundamentalists as an early part of evangelicals' self-definition.

³⁶³ See again Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 125. This is often not defined in its usage but "evangelicals are keenly aware that something out there—"the world"—exists, that they stand in opposition to that something, and that they have an obligation to interact with it redemptively."

counseling followers of Christ that they needed to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians. Paul's argument in Romans focuses on the ineffectiveness of the Jewish law for salvation in order to more fully explain why non-Jewish believers need not become Jewish. As a way of making this text relevant to her 21st-century group of readers, none of whom thought that one needed to become Jewish first to become Christian, Vicky told the group to think of the Jews referred to in the text as those who had grown up in the church of any denomination and the Gentiles as those who had not.³⁶⁴ In other words, Vicky is saying that learning how to be Christian from others is learning a bunch of rules that are just as ineffective for making one a Christian as following the Jewish law.

Drawing the boundary between insiders and outsiders based on whether or not one is just following rules or whether one has an individual enthusiasm for following God means that there is an omnipresent danger of just going through the motions and thereby falling outside the boundary.³⁶⁵ The boundary between insiders and outsiders would become meaningless therefore without constant vigilance about one's own affective disposition towards Christianity. Vicky and the others in the Wednesday Breathing Space group told re-conversion stories in which the individual experience of being delivered from rules was constantly renewed. Individuals in the group indicated that they were experiencing deliverance from a rules-based mindset, even if they represented themselves as believers already and especially if they had grown up in the church. Kristina, in particular, told me several times that the study was having a profound effect on her because she had been raised

³⁶⁴ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, February 3, 2010.

³⁶⁵ The women in this group would argue doctrinally that someone is "once saved always saved" and that once you cross over that boundary between insider and outsider, you cannot become unsaved. However, the narratives they told of renewal communicated the necessity of constant or repeated conversions.

in performance-oriented household.³⁶⁶ Vicky also modeled this kind of recurrent deliverance in her examples. She had told the group that she had come to Christ when she was 6 because she wanted God to make her good, but she was “really saved” when she was 15. She also shared this experience below halfway through the study.

Vicky: I wanted to share with you real quickly how much chapter 5 for me has just rocked my world. I was pretty surprised. I told you when we first met that I’ve been raised in the church, I’ve been a Christian since I was 6 or 8. Studied the Bible my entire life, and yet this last week, God, he...the truths that have been running around in my head, for a lot of years really, but certainly as I’ve been studying Romans. I began preparing for this in the end of October. Those things finally came home to roost in my heart. So last week’s lesson, I don’t know if it communicated in the same way to you, but what struck me and finally woke me up was that whole idea in the second half of chapter 5, when Paul is talking about being saved. And he started in chapter 3 talking about justification, and how it’s not by faith through Jesus Christ *only*. And what we learn in the second half of chapter 5 is he went back to the garden of Eden and showed us the contrast between the first Adam and all we were and are in Adam versus all that we are in Christ. I must have said it several times, but it didn’t strike me until after I got home, that everything that Adam is is true of those who belong to Adam. And everything, *everything* that Christ is is true of those who belong to Christ. And I don’t remember really what I shared with you, so if I’m repeating I apologize, but that really rocked me because I have a spiritual friend...We’ve been meeting together for several years, on every Tuesday morning. When I was in Holland, we would call each other every week. And we would pray and talk and she knows me like nobody else. She often gets on to me because I’ve always told her that my heart and my hope is that I want to get to heaven and I want to stand before Jesus and I just want to hear him say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” But that colors my thinking and everything that I do, which I thought that was a good thing. But I realize I have never gotten away from this performance-base. Yeah, I’m saved, I’m saved by faith, Christ has forgiven all of my sin. I’m totally with that, and yet every day I’ve been living as if there was something I could do to make Jesus say “Well done.” Or something that I could do that would keep him from saying, “Well done.” And I am just amazed at how he has communicated in my heart this week that he has already said, “Well done.”³⁶⁷

Vicky here narrates a deliverance from the expectation that she had placed on herself for being good or perfect, but her realization that she was still acting if she had to follow rules illustrates how the sense of deliverance from legalism is not a stable boundary marker. One

³⁶⁶ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, February 3, 2010; Interview with Kristina, May 24, 2010.

³⁶⁷ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 24, 2010.

can apparently stray over the boundary without realizing it and therefore believers must always be renewing their sense of deliverance and looking for the boundary posts.

As Vicky's equivocation ("I won't say us") in her engineless Christian example suggests, using an interior experience of God as a boundary marker means that the external evidence of whether or not one is inside can sometimes be ambiguous. This is problematic if the boundary is supposed to be more starkly drawn and to help make the boundary more visible the boundary can be reinforced by the idea that the emotional experience of Jesus should lead to changes in one's life that makes one distinct from those on the outside. The Thursday morning group found a lot of support for this idea of being distinct from the surrounding culture in their reading of Exodus, by interpreting the commandments that were given to the Israelites as ways of being distinct from the cultures around them as opposed to commandments for approaching God through ritually defined ways. In the context of trying to make sense of all the commandments Moses brought down from the mountain, Ellie said...

Ellie: It's kind of the same principle for us. You know, we don't obey God and the rules because we're trying to earn his love or draw him to us in some way, he's already with us and he loves us and he's given us everything so in response to that we live the way he's asked us to live out of gratitude. I think you can draw that same principle of, "I'm already with you. You are already different, I've set you apart and so this is how you demonstrate that. What you are saying to the people around you. I think it's, like you said, a reputation for being a downer God. I that's because people misinterpret this kind of stuff. It sounds like, "*Here's the rules!*" (*makes chopping motion onto hand to accompany each word*) It's like the rules only flow out of the fact that he's already with you and he's present and he's already changed you. And so therefore, do this. Instead of, "Do this and I'll be with you."³⁶⁸

³⁶⁸ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, April 22, 2010.

In this remark, Ellie both distances the believer's experience of God from what would be considered "legalistic" following of rules and at the same time finds value in following the commandments as a way of marking the believer as distinct from others.

Reflecting the precarious nature of a boundary based on interior states, insiders must guard against influences that might lead one astray. Sometimes the women in the Breathing Space groups sometimes use "legalism" to indicate how insiders could be heading in the wrong direction towards "pseudo-religion."

Vicky: Because the world has lost the image of God, it emphasizes what we are on the outside, but he says don't be taken captive (reading from Col 2:8) with the world's perspective, the world's thinking, according to the tradition of men. And we often think of that in religious terms, but it's very easy, I think, for all of us to realize how many pseudo religions, how many gods, have overtaken us through the thinking of the world.³⁶⁹

Vicky mentioned a few times that her goal in getting the group to understand the doctrines in Romans was so that they could explain the gospel to others, especially their own families.³⁷⁰ However, Vicky also said that the point of learning these doctrines was so that individuals could spot false teachers and this attitude of vigilance was more pervasively directed towards sorting through influences on the self.³⁷¹ Sharon noted early on when she was sharing that she had been listening to Romans in an audio format that she did not want to download a Bible study from just anybody.³⁷² In one discussion when the Wednesday group was reading the John Piper book about *The Glory of God*, the women thought that everyone had a tendency to either over-emphasize legalism or to over-emphasize grace in their individual

³⁶⁹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 31, 2010.

³⁷⁰ This coincides with what James Bielo says is one of the primary activities in evangelical Bible studies, *Words on the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*, 113-134.

³⁷¹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, February 3, 2010.

³⁷² Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, January 27, 2010.

Christian perspective and that whole churches might over-emphasize one or the other.³⁷³ This suggests that there is a balance to be struck and that individual Christians as well as communities need to be vigilant in avoiding legalism.³⁷⁴

Furthermore, the interiority of the boundary is also a problem when evaluating whether others are insiders or outsiders, since it can be difficult to judge the authenticity of someone else's experience. Therefore, when something outside of the believer/unbeliever boundary is referenced, it must be flagged as such, like when A mentioned the popular book *The Shack* for something valuable in it, she quickly also mentioned that is not theologically sound.³⁷⁵ In these cases, the women rely on doctrinal criteria, using whether or not something falls into or promotes "legalism" as the category by which Christian resources are evaluated. For example, Vicky flagged a certain reading of James, saying "this can suck us back into salvation by works, if we do not understand that James is trying to redefine faith."³⁷⁶ For instance, Monica in the Thursday group referenced a book that she read about praying through the names of God in the Old Testament, but she did not want to recommend the book because she there were too many things in the book that were easy to take legalistically.³⁷⁷ Any theological perspective that does not hold an individual experience of Jesus and the deliverance from rules as paramount is seen as dangerously detracting from the core of Christian salvation.

³⁷³ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, November 4, 2009.

³⁷⁴ I never actually heard any other examples of the danger of over-emphasizing grace or an "anything goes" attitude, so clearly legalism was more of the concern.

³⁷⁵ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, October 28, 2009. *The Shack*, by Canadian author William P. Young, has been endorsed by some prominent evangelicals (including Eugene Peterson in a back matter review), but has been criticized by others like Chuck Colson ("Stay Out of the Shack." *Religion Today*. May 8, 2008. <http://www.religiontoday/news/stay-out-of-the-shack-11575218.html>. Accessed February 3, 2013.

³⁷⁶ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 3, 2010.

³⁷⁷ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 18, 2010.

“Legalism” also helps to explain the boundary between believers and non-Christian religious outsiders. Vicky had the opportunity to explain that the charge of “legalism” applied to followers of non-Christian religions when a young woman came to the Wednesday evening group to talk about and raise support for her upcoming move to a Muslim country. This young woman had used the word “Godfearer” to talk about how there were many Muslims who loved God but had not yet become believers. This language is taken from the book of Acts where this term is used to describe Gentiles who were followers of Judaism or Gentile converts into Judaism who are interested in Jesus and eventually become followers of Jesus. After the young missionary’s presentation, Vicky worked this language into an overview of what the group had already discussed in Romans and into the language of being under the law and not under grace.

Vicky: Remember chapter 5, we were all born in Adam, right? We were all born with all of the characteristics of Adam. And some of us born in Adam, we continued in that direction and he talks about it in the end of chapter 1: rebellion, doing our own thing, and God gives over to futility. But there was also people that although they were in Adam they were godseekers, right? And he talks about those from the Jewish perspective, from the perspective of the Jewish religion as an example, in chapter 2 through the first part of chapter 3. There are people in the world that...we’ve developed all kind of religions, right? Muslim being one of them. Buddhist and everything that you can imagine, because people seek God, right? And he talks about that those people who seek God are trying to attain a level of goodness, the law being the most perfect example.³⁷⁸

In this section of Romans, Paul shifts from the metaphor of being under the law or being under Christ to a metaphor of being born of Adam or being born of Christ. In her comment here, Vicky folds those of other religions into those who seek to be good by following the law into her narrative about unbelievers being those under Adam and believers being those under Christ. Vicky’s example here illustrates how the charge of seeking God through the

³⁷⁸ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, April 28, 2010.

law or “legalism” helps to explain how evangelical Christianity’s exclusive claim to salvation makes sense of the pervasive existence of other religions and other Christian traditions.

Since there is only one definition of who is in and out, then theoretically the work of evangelism and outreach does the work of bringing others inside the boundary into an individual experience of Jesus Christ whether they are laboring under “legalism” as a means to get to God or not. The focus of conversion into an interior experience of faith makes it difficult to find a foundation for forms of outreach that focus on physical needs. This is also perhaps a partial explanation for the difference between the Breathing Space group and other groups in the way that women’s issues are not present in the discussion. Besides the possibility of being doctrinally suspect within the evangelical tradition, concerns about women’s equality or social justice could potentially distract from the core issues of individual salvation. Like many contemporary evangelicals, the church of which Breathing Space was a part supported many outreach initiatives that addressed social issues especially in terms of serving the nearby refugee communities, but it was clear that these social issues should never be emphasized above spiritual outreach. The most poignant example of the preference for spiritual versus physical needs that I experienced and also the only time that women’s concerns were ever addressed directly was when an evangelical woman missionary who was starting a ministry for women in Guatemala came to speak to both the Wednesday and Thursday Breathing Space groups. She referenced the “Girl Effect” video that makes the argument for international development to be directed at education and family planning for adolescent girls and she described how her organization would be providing job training for women. However, she also made it clear that her organization would be different from other development organizations in that it would emphasize spiritual education along with job

training, suggesting that without this element of her work, it would have not have been central enough to the primary concern of facilitating encounters with Jesus for others.³⁷⁹

Some aspects of the individual and interiorized nature of the boundary between believers and non-believers line up with scholarship on evangelicals and some may be particular to this church location. David Bebbington crafted the mostly widely used definition of evangelicalism in which there are four features the describe evangelicalism: crucicentrism, biblicism, conversionism, and activism.³⁸⁰ These are broadly defined characteristics and so it is not hard to see how the Breathing Space groups fit into his definition. Biblicism has not been addressed in this chapter, but much of the previous chapters describes the Breathing Space groups' relationship to the Bible and there are traces of the Bible used as a boundary marker in Angela's search for a more "Bible-centered" church after her conversion.³⁸¹ Certainly, the emphasis on conversion is also evident in the "candids" the women shared with one another. However, Breathing Space's use of the term "legalism" may be a particular form of crucicentrism that is prevalent in evangelical groups that also identify as part of the Reformed tradition or even this evangelical Presbyterian

³⁷⁹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, March 24, 2010; Breathing Space Thursday meeting, March 25, 2010.

³⁸⁰ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from 1730s to 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 6. George Marsden also includes transdenominationalism as a fifth feature, "Introduction: The Evangelical Denomination," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), vii-xvi. I did not observe any specific interactions with other denominations and would not have necessarily in a church-based group. Nonetheless, there was evidence of transdenominationalism in the use of evangelical materials from other denominations like Vicky's use of aspects of the Precepts Bible study materials. Furthermore, the willingness to recognize that there could be believers in other denominations is the foundation of a transdenominationalist paradigm.

³⁸¹ There are undoubtedly other ways that the Breathing Space groups use "biblical" as a boundary marker. For a fuller treatment of "literal" readings of the Bible used as boundary markers, see Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004); Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

denomination in particular.³⁸² Legalism combines a conversionist focus on individual transformation with the understanding of Jesus's death on cross as a release from the law (a form of penal substitutionary atonement) that results in a view that proper religion or "true" faith is privatized and spiritual rather than enacted through ritual practices or other kinds of apparently external religious practices.

Bebbington's term "activism" is also quite broad and can include both evangelistic or conversionist outreach and engagement in the public sphere. Much of religious studies scholarship on evangelicalism has been in response to and in attempt to explain evangelicalism's resurgent involvement in the public sphere in the late 70's and 1980's given the focus in evangelicalism on the conversion of individuals.³⁸³ Evangelicalism's engagement with the public sphere is more complex than observations from a few evangelical groups who are not directly engaged in outreach activities can elucidate. The Breathing Space women never talked about anything political and the church of which Breathing Space also seemed careful not to engage in any political discourse even if the church was involved in various social justice issues (primarily work with refugees, sex trafficking and addiction). However, there are two areas where the discourses about insiders and outsiders in the Breathing Space groups might paradoxically provide impetus for

³⁸² In my personal interactions with members of this denomination in another city, I have heard the term "legalism" used in the same way. Nonetheless, this hunch cannot be verified without a much wider study of this denomination in comparison with other forms of evangelicalism.

³⁸³ "The rise of the Religious Right and the flourishing of twentieth-century conservatism have for understandable reasons gripped historians in recent years, so much so that there has not been a lot of oxygen left over for beleaguered religious liberals and ecumenical Protestants. Evangelicals have stolen the show not only among journalists chronicling the current political landscape, but also among historians trying to make sense of conservatism's resurgence in the aftermath of the New Deal and during the religious revival that the Cold War helped incite." Leigh E. Schmidt, "The Parameters and Problematics of American Religious Liberalism", in *American Religious Liberalism* eds. Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 11-12. See also James Bielo, *Words on the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*, 2-3, for an overview of the wealth of recent scholarship on evangelicalism.

engagement in the public sphere despite their emphasis on right religion being comprised of interior experiences. The first is the very discourse of “the world” being a threat to the religious insider. Christian Smith talks about the discourse of discrimination and second-class citizenship being another way that evangelicals enact boundaries between themselves and others.³⁸⁴ Tanya, the women’s ministries leader who attended the Wednesday Breathing Space group, make a reference to the “double standard the world has with Christians” in which there is tolerance for everyone else but hostility towards Christians.³⁸⁵ The only evidence that I heard for this kind of hostility was when Vicky and Sharon mentioned interactions with militant atheist individuals in their lives. One can also imagine that drawing visible boundaries between believers and non-believers can engender uncomfortable interactions with others if those boundaries are drawn in the presence of those deemed “outside.” Along with the need to be vigilant against being led astray by the world, these kinds of hostile interactions could provide fuel for engagement in the public sphere as a response to perceived discrimination. The second possibility for the discourses about right religion being interior and wrong religion being exterior to foster activist engagements in the public sphere is when the distrust of socially-derived Christian identity merges with a larger distrust of society and by extension the government. If the government is seen in some way to be enforcing or endorsing a form of religion based on external realities, then religion based on an interior experience of God can be seen to be under threat. Again, none of the women

³⁸⁴ “One consistent theme we heard from the evangelicals we interviewed was their perception of a double-standard in American public discourse that discriminates against Christians. Time and again we heard evangelicals observe that every racial, ethnic, religious, political, and ideological perspective existing is given fair time and a fair hearing, *except* the Christian perspective.” Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 140. Also forthcoming book by Jason C. Bivins, *Embattled Majority*, “a genealogy of the rhetoric of “religious bigotry” in conservative Christian politics since the 1960s.” <http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/jcbivins>. Accessed February 3, 2013.

³⁸⁵ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, April 21, 2010. It is likely that Tanya means evangelical Christians here.

in the Breathing Space groups seemed to openly discuss these kinds of public engagements, but the discourse of religious insiders being under threat from the outside that undergirds their understanding of what it means to be a true Christian could have varied implications in the public sphere.

“Can Everyone Be Inside?” - Mysterion and Dames and the Divine

The Mysterion and Dames and the Divine groups were different from the groups discussed above in that the value of inclusion itself is even more of a core value instead of an extension of the understanding of salvation as potentially available to anyone who converts as it was for the Breathing Space groups. While welcoming others was very important to the Quinn Temple group, the Mysterion and Dames and the Divine groups spent more time discussing how to include others as a problem in and of itself. This difference may derive from the fact that the books that these women were reading, a liberal-leaning study guide on the book of John and *Speaking of Faith* by Krista Tippett that draws from radio discussions of spiritual issues from many different religious and scientific perspectives, prompted the issues of inclusion more than the largely evangelical resources used by Quinn Temple and Breathing Space groups. It was clear that the value of inclusion was non-negotiable for these two groups of women, but there were challenges to integrating that value with their Christian faith and for at least some of the women these challenges were significant enough to threaten their own faith in Christianity. In both groups, the issue of who should be included and how was a contentious issue. For both groups as well, women’s roles within Christianity and within religion more broadly were laced through the discussions about defining religious boundaries.

For the group of younger women, *Mysterion*, some of the discussions about inclusion and defining group boundaries were connected with the group's mainline Presbyterian identity. All of the women in this group had grown up Presbyterian, two were training to be Presbyterian ministers and at least two had Presbyterian ministers as fathers. In other words, the women in the *Mysterion* group had strong Presbyterian identities and their close ties to their denomination colored their understanding of who was outside of that identity. In particular, the *Mysterion* women distanced themselves from more conservative Presbyterian denominations that do not ordain women. This distancing was not surprising in the case of the two women in the group who were seeking ordination, but the sentiment was shared by other women in the group as well. For instance, Christina told the group a story about how she had been chatted up by a man in coffeeshop who identified as Presbyterian. When she learned that he was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which does not ordain women, Christina was no longer interested and told the other women, "I want no part of that. I want to be able to preach in the pulpit."³⁸⁶ In response, Sarah, who was not seeking ordination herself, related to the group that in college she had dissuaded her then boyfriend now fiancé from going to a PCA church on the basis of the fact that they did not ordain women. It was clear from this conversation that the women in this group define themselves in opposition to conservative Presbyterian denominations and possibly other conservative Christian groups that do not allow women in religious leadership.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ *Mysterion* meeting, February 9, 2010. Reconstructed from notes.

³⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the women in the *Mysterion* group had different levels of ease with claiming the label feminist, which I attribute to a generational and larger cultural unease with the term. While I do not have space to include the discussion here, the group discussed the term specifically on June 15, 2010 when Laura was happy to claim the term in particular and Kelly being uncertain about it and asking others what they meant by being feminist.

On the other hand, this group's high level of involvement with the denomination may have actually softened some of their boundaries with other Christian groups, since mainline Presbyterianism contains many liberal and conservative camps.³⁸⁸ For instance, during a discussion about Jesus' prayer for his disciples at the Last Supper in John, Laura lifted up for discussion the point made in the discussion guide that Jesus does not pray that we all be the same, but that we may all be one. She wanted to talk about how we might love one another despite differences that divide us. In the discussion that followed, excerpted below, Lisa and Emily shared stories about dealing with diversity in the church that show how much they valued being able to connect to those in the church with whom they disagreed on issues of gender and sexuality.

Laura: I'll read the last thing that really stuck out to me, that I thought was really interesting that she said. *To be one is not to say that we will be all the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as we listen tot Jesus pray we are reminded that the quality of our life together, our ability to make visible the unique relationship that exists by God's grace among us is our most convincing testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.* So I really like that concept that she's explaining in John, that he's not asking us to be the same, just to accept and love one other

Lisa: (*overlapping starts*) Can I? I was going to tell y'all a story about this past year at seminary, if y'all don't mind listening to it. It's really short, I can make it shorter, as I want to make it. (Laura: Please!) But it was probably one of the biggest impacts on my life and it was not happening in the classroom, which was very cool. There was something that came up on campus that *everybody* was talking about and worried about and it was there is...an lgbt organization on campus and they were basically saying we want equal housing opportunities on campus. If you're going to accept us as students, we need to be able to live with a partner. Because married people...we can't get married, but you do have married housing, so our lifestyle needs to be okay at seminary. And that has lots of theological implications and lots of practical implications and lots of people's emotions run very deep on all sorts of levels...So it eventually came to we just decided to have a class meeting about it. The junior class,

³⁸⁸ In *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), Robert Wuthnow describes how after World War II, divisions emerged between religious liberals and religious conservatives. He argues that "the decision by most conservatives at the time, as well as most liberals, to retain membership in their denominations rather than forming separate splinter groups had the effect of upholding the principle of diversity within the major denominations" (138). Therefore, "the divide between religious liberals and conservatives cuts directly through the middle of middle of many established denominations" (138).

our first year class, said, “let’s just meet and talk about this,” because there was so much mumbling and side conversations we just wanted to have a big... which was a very bold thing to do by our student government. So *everybody* came to this, but not other classes and no other class had a meeting like this. But I want to tell you I think that was the kingdom on earth, when that meeting happened. Because there were people who are African-American Baptist who have never said the word “homosexual” in church before because its so foreign, would never even talk about it, talking about how that is near and dear to their faith. Whereas, someone stood up and said, whereas I have had a conversation with a gay friend, and said his name, and he said, “it is like you cannot separate my sexuality from my identity as a child of God,” was his argument for accepting me as a person and I should have equal rights. He said basically, scripture and what I hear as authoritative scripture, you cannot be separate it from my identity as a Christian. All these really honest things that came up, everybody at the end of every comment, there was a “thank you for letting me share that, in this place where I feel safe to say it.” And it was looking people in the eyes, knowing who was coming to us with proposals and really talking about it. And everybody, almost everybody spoke their piece on it and said this is what I’m struggling with now....It was a safe space, it was a bond between everybody. And you knew, because everybody knows where everybody stands on it, because we’ve all talked about it. And it was just respect for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and at the end...this was so cool, I’m sorry I’m going to cry...the president of student body, African-American Baptist, stood up and read scripture and a white male gay guy said a prayer at the end and everybody’s holding hands and everybody’s crying. And none of us really knew why we were crying, but I was like, you know, the fact that...just this, we didn’t have to be...we were working to get to one and I think that’s more than all the same church does or the General Assembly [of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.] does. I left and I thought that feels more productive than ever agreeing on anything, was that there was that space that that could happen

Laura: Totally moving!

Lisa: It was! We had people say to us afterwards “what an awesome class you have, how blessed you are to be able to even have...” Because we’re all so different, we’re the most diverse class that’s come through. And other classes didn’t have the faith that it would be okay and that they would hold each other up while disagreeing, in the way that we really kinda could. And people were hugging each other afterwards, like they had spoken directly to someone and said this is really how I feel and I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings and they would hug and be like okay. I dunno. So that’s what it makes me think of.

...

Emily: I have a similar experience to yours, when I was at GA [General Assembly]. And this was ten years ago and I was a YAD [Young Adult Delegate] and of course the issue of ordination [of gays and lesbians] was the hot topic...

Lisa: It’s been the hot topic for what fifteen years now?

Emily: And so we’re in a different place than we were ten years ago, and sitting around that circle at that time, we knew that...it was a big issue but it wasn’t gonna...it was not really a chance that anything was going to change...yet. And it was just a group of mostly YADs that came together and it was a similar kind of thing. It was just an

open kind of environment, where there were definitely people on opposite ends of the spectrum, but to share and say, “I struggle with what you are saying because I don’t feel the same way, but these are my struggles and this is what I don’t understand and this is what I can’t...”

SLK: I think that can be so transformative though. Because the times when I felt like people were vulnerable in seminary, I learned a lot. And my views changed a lot while I was there, partly because I could see the diversity that was there. It does give you hope. The Mennonite denomination’s also sort of dealing with it and sort of not. They’ve sort of tabled the sexuality issue and our polity is quite different than Presbyterian polity, so there isn’t a denomination-wide policy because ordination happens through the conferences, kinda like through the synods.³⁸⁹ And my conference is doing a lot in figuring out how do we remain a conference when people have different views... And so as a congregation we’ve been talking about, so this is more on the congregational level, how do congregations who think differently come together and remain in a body together. And that’s really the question at General Assembly.

Emily: It’s hard, because what it means when you’re in smaller groups is you can see the person as person, a person who has faith just like you do and struggles in their faith just like you do, and that that’s the bottom line. Being able to do it as a class, or as a group of YADs, is that when you get to the form of plenary, where you’re with hundreds and hundreds of people, it’s not my opposition... yeah, we’re not on this side that side, but I talked to you last night, and I know that you’re on a different front. You disagree with me but I can... respectfully address your concerns, and we can have a conversation about this and not a fight. And how do you do that with congregations, when you don’t get that, that’s the real... being able to have that intimacy.

Lisa: Another part of this too is kind of going along with staying one as a body... I struggle a lot with people’s different styles and different ideologies and is it really ok for us as the body of Christ to be this divided and let one issue cause that division. To some degree, I think it’s helpful to diversity to say live and let live, but at a certain point even if we can’t agree, can we at least talk or worship together? That gets complicated I guess because worship to people looks so different. When I was preaching this summer I was preaching to [this retirement community]. I’m sure Christina has told you about it before maybe, it’s the retirement community right next to [the church where I did my internship]. There’s this whole white flight thing happening. It’s a Presbyterian home and there’s a bunch of African-American Baptists who have come in. They’re really charismatic and sit in the corner and “Amen!” everything and that’s really disruptive to the older Presbyterian “frozen chosen” people. It’s this really crazy dichotomy of a place and nobody can hear anything and the microphone doesn’t work. It’s kind of comical to walk in there the first time and say, “I’m preaching to who!?” I guess the long and the short would be

³⁸⁹ Presbyterian organizational structure is roughly representational in which the congregations send representatives (elders and pastors) to presbyteries and on up the organizational structure up until the General Assembly, where denominational leaders are elected and denomination-wide policies are legislated. However, the denominational leaders ordain ministers, install pastors, and approve the opening and closing of congregations. The synods are the regional bodies directly below the denomination-wide organization and above the presbyteries.

how do you bridge to where you feel like you can at least worship together, to be one together. Even though worship looks so different, how do you individualize it and also unite it?³⁹⁰

In Lisa's final comment here, she recognizes how difficult it can be to find common ground within Christian communities, but Lisa's and Emily's stories still hold up the ideal that finding this common ground is possible. In contrast to the distancing from conservative Christian others above, these women also recognize that at least in theory those who hold different views from themselves on issues of gender and sexuality are also part of the same Christian community.

In general, the women in the Mysterion group also believe in the possibility of finding common ground with other Christian denominations, though there was less discussion about these kinds of differences in particular. Another discussion about the book of John contained similar themes about conflicts within the church and how Jesus commands his followers to love all Christians alike, even when loving may mean disagreeing. In this discussion, the Mysterion women recognized the difficulty of extending love to those who reject you and say that you are not really a Christian. In particular, this conversation brought up Laura's difficulties with accepting Catholicism, on the basis of her feeling rejected by the Catholic church and her brothers' experiences going to a strict Catholic school. In the excerpt below, Laura responds specifically to the practice of crossing one's arms across one's chest in order to indicate that you want to receive a blessing instead of the Eucharist during Catholic mass.

Laura: This action right here (*crossing her arms across her chest*) is so offensive to me...Because this right here is like an X. It's an X...I feel like it's a mark like, "I'm not good enough." I've had to do it so many times. My brothers went to Catholic high school, they had to do it their entire time of high school and it was *humiliating*.
SLK: They didn't just sit down? They *had* to go up?

³⁹⁰ Mysterion meeting, August 10, 2010.

Laura: No, they had to go up there and do it their entire high school career. Then [I had to do it] at any thing we had to for them and then at all the Catholic weddings I've been to and stuff. And I think it's completely and totally humiliating....I wish I didn't have a lot of anger towards Catholicism but I do have a lot of anger towards Catholicism. I do. I think my brothers were not treated well and I think that...I just don't like it. I wish that I didn't feel that way but I just...Maybe it's just the high school that they went to, but I think when you go into a school and you see pictures of fetuses up on walls and there are nuns screaming at you about how terrible abortion is, I just, I have issues with that. And we don't need to get into it...³⁹¹

The others in the group did not share Laura's strong antipathy and brought up examples of people they knew and respected who had converted to Catholicism from a Protestant background. It was clear that they recognized the radical differences between Catholics and Protestant groups, but were not particularly troubled by them. Even Laura, however, in her last comment articulates that in this instance her value of inclusion is at odds with her emotions and she even attempts to transcend them by saying that perhaps her experience was not representative of all Catholics. Laura recognizes, along with the others, that their understanding of Christianity requires them to extend love to other Christian groups, even when it is difficult.

The fate of followers of other religions or non-Christians more generally was a more regular and but similarly challenging topic of discussion. The women in this group wanted to reconcile their belief in the validity of non-Christian religions with their Christian faith, but recognized that traditional Presbyterian thought did not make this easy. There were many ways that the group tried to find ways around traditional thought or to make peace with it. In a discussion about the end times in response to a section in Mark often called "the little apocalypse," Sarah mentioned that the hardest part for her was thinking about how her non-Christian friends would be traditionally be the ones receiving judgment in this apocalyptic narrative. This leads into a discussion about the Presbyterian belief in the elect, which

³⁹¹ Mysterion meeting, July 27, 2010.

teaches that there is a limited and set number of people who will be saved and which seems to be the sticking point for many of the women. Christina and Lisa offer the conclusions that they have come to that open up some room for ambiguity about whether non-Christians can be saved.

Christina: There's another part, and it's verse 22, it says, "*False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens to lead astray if possible the elect.*" And that last part, the elect...

Sarah: It's very Presbyterian.

Christina: Yeah, it's sort of a word of hope in the middle of all of this, that God has chosen people that God is protecting and that God is with those people. And we don't know necessarily who that is, one or the other, but we trust that God does and God works through that. So I think that there's supposed to be, in a weird sense, a kind of freedom in that. That I can't do anything to make it better or to make it worse. It is what it is, to use that cliché. And there's great line, and I think I talked about this in Sunday School, there's a great line in one of our confessions about having a good hope for all people, that we don't know how it's going to turn out, but we can have a good hope for all. And I love, that's like my standard, one of my favorite confessional...so that gives me a little bit of peace in the midst of all of this. And I still have a hard time. What's my issue with having to make peace with all of this? Is it necessarily supposed to make me feel good? Maybe not and it's good to be unsettled.

Laura: But then doesn't it get you thinking, well, who are the elect?

Christina: Yeah, but at some point, and Calvin was big on this, if at some point you want to go to Calvin...

Lisa: "idle speculation" (*chuckling*)

Christina: Yeah, at some point it's idle speculation and you just trust that God...And it doesn't always, I dunno...that requires a different kind of...I dunno what the word I'm looking for is...

Lisa: When I first heard that in theology this past semester, about the whole pre-destination conversation, it kind of hit me over the head with, "Well that's cop out answer, should I just trust God?" But ultimately that's what I arrived at after a semester of like, "from the exegesis that all these theologians have done, surely we can figure out who the elect are." And how do I make myself okay with my personal desire for everybody to be saved. How does that work in my own theology? I feel like the answer I had to come with is: [deciding between] universalists who say everybody is saved and then people who say only those who speak this particular Christian confession will be saved? Thank God, God is God. That's where I came out. Not knowing but just being okay with the fact that I didn't know...³⁹²

³⁹² Mysterion meeting, January 26, 2010.

In this conversation, the Christina and Lisa, as women who were trained at a Presbyterian seminary, engage with the most restrictive of Presbyterian doctrines about salvation and try to find some wiggle room by invoking other Presbyterian doctrines about the sovereignty of God. Ultimately, the women in this discussion do believe that others can be saved but are uncertain about how that fits into traditional doctrines about salvation.

On the other hand, the fate of other religious believers was a problem that Kelly was actively trying to solve. In a discussion about the book of John, Kelly was leading and she articulates her problem with the dichotomous language that John uses to describe those who are from heaven and those who are not in terms of the fate of followers of other religions.

Kelly: ...My big question to leave us pondering about this, that I can't get past, is how do you read chapter 3 and read this ultimatum that the only way into the kingdom of God is through Christ...

Morgan: When does that have to happen?

Kelly: Right, when and...what about the Jews? And what about the Muslims? People who believe in the same God of Moses, just like we believe in the God of Moses. People with whom we share five books of text and whatnot, do we really believe...I struggle with this all the time, as probably one of biggest beefs with Christianity, I struggle with it all the time...the thought that being a Christian means that I have to believe that there's no hope for Jews and for Muslims. Even though *I know* that they believe in the same God as we do and we share history with these people. Just because they believe Jesus was a prophet and not the son of God, they're not getting into the kingdom of heaven. Really? Really? Do I really think that God would do that? Really? And I'm not sure I do. So does that mean I'm not a really Christian?³⁹³

The others in the group offered possible theological perspectives in which devout persons of other religions might have a chance at salvation. Again, Sarah acknowledges that this is a difficult question but one for which she has resolved that God has a way to include others and she does not need a specific answer.

Sarah: I think that's more along the lines of where I fall right now. I do believe that you need Jesus to get to God. But I don't think Jesus's coming meant that God's covenant to the Jews was a lie. God made them the chosen people knowing that Jesus was going to come later. I don't think God would go back and say, "Well, you're not chosen

³⁹³ Mysterion meeting, April 20, 2010.

anymore cuz...” And I think where I am right now with it, is that Jesus came because we needed him to get close to God, period. But as far as how that decision is made of who gets to God and who doesn’t and what it really means to come through Christ, I’m very Presbyterian in that I wash my hands of that and say, you know, it’s God’s decision, which means it’s a perfect decision. And that’s what I have to trust. So that’s where I am right now, but think it’s something all liberal Christians struggle with on an almost daily basis. If you don’t read the bible as black and white, then your heart’s going to have trouble with that.³⁹⁴

As the discussion continues, Kelly shares what the guide offers as an explanation that only those who know about Jesus and choose not to follow are the outsiders according to John, which implicitly opens the door to salvation by some other means to those who have not heard. But the women in the group find this explanation even more problematic because they cannot imagine that in our globalized age that someone would not have heard. They also despair that our media age would make it difficult for anyone to truly hear and want to follow Christianity. Kelly brings up the movie “Religulous” as an example, that if one only knew about Christianity from such negative portrayals in the media, one would certainly not want to join. In this discussion, there are many solutions offered, but all of the women in the group recognize that as liberal Christians they struggle to reconcile the fate of other religious people with their own Christian faith.

The discussion comes up again as the group is studying John and this time Kelly resists what she sees as avoidance of the issue in the other women’s “peace” with the issue. Kelly rearticulates here problem saying that she doesn’t want to believe in something that excludes so many people. Sarah responds that she does not think that Christianity is exclusive, rather the exclusivity comes from the human response to grace. She says that this is where she is and how she makes peaces with this problem. Kelly’s response is, “I’m glad

³⁹⁴ Mysterion meeting, April 20, 2010.

you can, but I'm not there yet."³⁹⁵ While the others recognize that it is a problem in Christian thought, they do not seem as stuck on the issue as Kelly does. The others seem satisfied that their understanding of who God is would not be so unmerciful as to exclude people of other religions and are satisfied with creating some space for ambiguity in the doctrines without articulating a specific theology that explains whether or not and how persons of other religions might be saved.

While the connection was never explicitly drawn in their discussions, the Mysterion women's difficulty with the exclusive elements of Christianity may derive from a discomfort with the idea of imposing one's faith on others in the public sphere. When she was leading the discussion, Morgan's shared her experience of being embarrassed when her parents want to pray before eating while they are out at a restaurant and asked the others if they had similar struggles with feeling embarrassed about Christianity. In response, Sarah and Emily bring up the public displays of being Christian that make them uncomfortable, like conversations with non-Christian friends, subway preaching and reading the Bible in public.

Sarah: ...[on the approval of man versus the approval of God] You know, Christianity gets a bad name for being overzealous and exclusive and so it's kind of like, so you want to paint this pretty picture of Christianity to people because you love it so much and it fills your heart so much and you want them to be open to the idea so that their heart can be filled too. *But* you paint them this pretty picture, and it's really because that's what you think they want to see and not because that's what Christianity is all about. That's kind of the difference. I would walk away from the conversation being like, "I didn't speak the truth. I just said what I thought they wanted me to say." So when I think of approval from man versus approval from God, those are the times in my life that I go back to and think, "You blew it." Those are the challenges that I come up with. Because I feel uncomfortable sometimes saying the blessing in public, depending on where I am. Just things like that. I'm trying to get a little bit more comfortable with uncomfortable parts of Christianity and that I think takes a lifetime to do.

Emily: I think about that. There are two characters that often hang out right in front of the [train] station. They are both evangelists and they both tell you that you are going to hell.

³⁹⁵ Mysterion meeting, May 4, 2010.

Diane: Just everyone's going to hell?

Emily: Well, you are sinning today, you are going to hell, but Jesus is the way. But you know it's not the "Jesus loves you and died on the cross for you," it's "Unless you believe in Jesus, you are going to hell. You are going to hell!"

Sarah: Hell is the default, not grace.

Emily: Right, and it's very in your face and it's very shouting. You know, they are what they are. They feel called to do it, so I can't...But anyway, I am a [train] reader, I always have a book on [the train], and I get lost in it. So by default when reading for Bible study, I always grab my Bible that day to read on the [train], because I generally don't get around to reading it at night. I always feel that little pang of, "Do I want really want to open up the Bible sitting in the middle of [the train]?" It's that always...it's the same sort of thing praying in front of everyone. (*whispering*) *Everyone sees me doing this*. But at the same time I also think, "Okay I can be the opposite of the person that puts it in your face. I can just be the person that opens it and reads it and this is about..."

Morgan: You're cool Christian! (*laughter*)

Emily: (*laughing*) I'll be the cool Christian! And that's okay. And I see other people reading. I sat down next to girl the other day who looked over at me and I saw her look at me and then she reached into her bag and pulled out her Bible. I was like, "Oh! This is kind of cool! (*laughter*)....I hear what you're saying."³⁹⁶

Emily distances herself from the evangelists on the subway because of the representation of Christianity they give, and while she respects that he feels called to do this, she does not feel called to proclaim her Christianity in such a public way. Her uncertainty about the evangelists' message could stem from both the public nature of the call for repentance and the sense that the message of "Jesus or hell" does not represent her understanding of the inclusiveness of Christianity.

Even though they acknowledge that they should not be concerned with "the approval of man" but with God's approval, in general the women in the Mysterion group judge Christianity as they think Christianity will be perceived in the larger culture. As Sarah's example suggests, they want their non-Christian friends to see Christianity as tolerant of other religions, inclusive of women, gays, and lesbians, and inoffensive in the public sphere. Their struggles to reconcile the exclusive claims of Christianity with a respect for other

³⁹⁶ Mysterion meeting, July 13, 2010.

religions and outsiders mirrors the struggles that American Protestant Christianity as a whole with the existence of other religions. In his article “A Plural World: The Protestant Awakening to World Religions,” Grant Wacker describes the different responses to world religions in the Protestant establishment from 1890-1930 (before many conservative Protestants broke away from the mainstream). The Mysterion women seem to take up a position that is close to the liberal position at the time that “denied that Christianity was either unique or exclusive, although they remained certain that it was immeasurably better than the others.”³⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the moderate Protestant majority “tried to have it both ways, holding that Christianity was superior to all other faiths, and therefore the loftiest road to salvation, but not necessarily the only one.”³⁹⁸ The struggle to maintain that balance characterized much of theological discourses about mission up until the 1960s and the women in Mysterion are still grappling with some of those arguments. Their unease with a triumphantly inclusive liberal position may be evidence of their continuing interactions with more conservative positions that hold that Christianity is unique and exclusive, which remain a vocal part of Southern Protestantism like that preacher on Emily’s commute.

Can Everyone (but Muslims) Be on the Inside?

The Dames and the Divine group’s discussions about the relationship between Christianity and other religions confirmed Sarah’s statement that “it’s something all liberal Christians have to deal with.” The women in Dames and the Divine were part of the same church as the Mysterion group and shared some of the same theological perspectives as the younger group of women. For instance, conservative Christian groups were similarly

³⁹⁷ Grant Wacker, “A Plural World: The Protestant Awakening to World Religions” in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 257.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

distanced from the group even if the older women did not identify conservative Presbyterian denominations like the Presbyterian Church in America specifically as outsiders. For the Dames, “Baptists” was more likely to be the umbrella term used for more conservative Christians, which was likely used because of the greater percentage of conservative Baptists than Presbyterians in this southeastern city and because some of the women had been Baptists before they adopted a liberal Christian outlook.³⁹⁹ As we have seen before, this group of women can be critical of the Christian tradition and might even be willing to reject parts of the tradition that they do not agree with, as Elaine does with Leslie Weatherhead’s book.⁴⁰⁰ The Dames were also more certain that Christianity itself was an inclusive religion, even to the point of asserting that one could be a Buddhist and a Christian at the same time, but they struggled to apply this inclusive stance to their understanding of Islam.

Although Islam had come up previously in a discussion on political discourse, the Dames and the Divine group spent several weeks discussing other religions while reading Krista Tippett’s book *Speaking of Faith*. This book is a meditation on current religious issues that includes some spiritual memoir and a lot of material from Tippett’s radio program, where she talks with leaders from many religious communities as well as with leading scientists. Early in the book, Tippett mentions how the despots of the 20th-century did not need God but used religion, which prompted the Dames to discuss examples of how religion can be used for evil. In the discussion that followed, Barbara asked the others how they

³⁹⁹ An example: Kathleen and Elise had gone to a talk by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg at a nearby college and they discussed how “the Baptists” had objected to these liberal scholars being invited and how there were two questions asked that were intended to be confrontational but were still polite. See Dames and the Divine meeting, April 14, 2010. Also, Baptists and Presbyterians have historically taken opposite sides of the theological debates around salvation by free will or predestination. For this reason, the Breathing Space groups as Presbyterians also distinguished themselves from Baptists, but they did so less frequently because shared evangelical identity might have trumped this difference in many cases.

⁴⁰⁰ See the Dames and the Divine “struggling” section of chapter two.

would know if their church was veering off into something like the Lutheran church's collaboration with Nazi Germany. Brenda responded with an example from her own experience that prompted some of the women to articulate how Christianity is distinct from other religions because of its focus on inclusion.

Brenda: Barbara, I lived through a situation similar to that. It was in Chapel Hill and we were in a Baptist church. It was when we left the Baptist church forever. But we were in the University Baptist church that my distant relative had been the minister of way back when. And it was called University because it was supposed to pull in the whole university. And we called a man who was teaching at Yale seminary and he came down and was effectively ousted by the congregation. Because he had the agreement with them when he came down that this was going to be the university church, that meant that in the 60s the black students would be invited into the church. So he did that, but as soon as they came in, they ousted him. And it moved gradually in that direction, cuz he was trying to pull them in and the people were trying to block them at the door. And as soon as we realized what was going on we left the church. That just couldn't be. You can tell, Barbara. That was an extreme case, but it *feels* wrong. It feels wrong.

Dorothy: I was thinking the same thing, agreeing with you. Whenever your group is attempting to exclude, you know you are on the wrong path. Christianity is about inclusion, isn't it?

This characterization of Christianity is in line with the liberal position on other religions articulated above.⁴⁰¹ Very quickly in the conversation, however, this articulation of the value of inclusion turns into a comparison with other religions, and Joan and Dorothy try to present the idea of Christianity's inclusiveness without representing other religions as inadequate. In other words, the idea that Christianity is distinct because it is inclusive runs into difficulties in terms of how to include other religions.

Dorothy: That's what's so radical about Christianity. I mean we hear, "love your neighbor, do this and that," but how many religions really profoundly say "love your enemies, bless them that curse you." This is turning the world upside down, and we're in such

⁴⁰¹ It also echoes the liberal refutation of conservative Christian critics of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. For instance, Julia Ward Howe asserted that Christ's sacrifice "was an act 'not...of exclusion but of an infinite and endless and joyous inclusion.'" Quoted in William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 111.

- a society that it doesn't seem that terribly strange. I mean it is, but if you think about it, it's really not the way we were created biologically...
- Barbara: And what about that love? That requires a certain type of love.
- Joan: It's a recognition that we're all children of God. Every so often it just strikes me so. It used to strike me on the bus in San Francisco. You know, I'd be riding the bus and all of the sudden say, "we're all children of God." It all of sudden just twists, in a good way, the way you look at the world. I think if you carry that into everyday life and respect the people that you might disagree with. That's where I have difficulty...
- Elaine: It's a real deviation from Judaism, eye for an eye. And if you think that's actually more fundamental in the world, I mean most religions...
- Brenda: It's also very exclusive...only us.
- Elaine: Uh huh, very exclusive, it's us and them. You're right! Christianity really is radical. It is when you think in those terms.
- Joan: An eye for an eye is basically a concept that was more merciful than what they used to do. You know, if somebody wronged you, you could kill them. So an eye for an eye, you couldn't kill them, you just to have to...
- Betty: That's what I heard, no more than eye for an eye.
- Elaine: But that cycle then continues.
- Dorothy: Same thing with Islam. People talk about how the Quran limits females, but at that time what it was really doing was giving tremendous *rights* to females, which was not happening in the western world...They just got stuck at that point.⁴⁰²

Joan defends Judaism and Dorothy defends Islam as also having inclusivity at their core, while leaving open the possibility that Christianity is still the *most* inclusive religion. Their defenses elaborate upon these women's definition of inclusion as welcoming people who are different from you and especially as promoting women's inclusion in all roles in society. Yet, it is clear from Elaine's comments that if you follow the idea that Christianity is *distinct* from other religions because it is inclusive, then including those beyond religious boundaries becomes a challenge. It is almost a truism, but inclusivity is tested when it comes up against those who might not also hold inclusivity as an ideal. William Hutchison argues that shared views on "cultural adaptation" or modernist positions within religions helped liberal forms of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the U.S. to gain more respect for each other and helped

⁴⁰² Dames and the Divine meeting, January 27, 2010.

the development of the ideal of pluralism.⁴⁰³ As is evident in the conversation above, only the correct forms of religion that promote mercy and promote the rights of women are allowed into the inclusive tent of Christianity. Moreover, as Wendy Brown has argued, tolerance or inclusion as the cost of entry into a civil society can be used to exclude by labeling others as intolerant and therefore uncivilized.⁴⁰⁴

While reading Krista Tippett's book the group's questions about Islam kept bubbling to the surface, and eventually the group asked Dorothy, who taught literature at a local college and had gone on trips to the Middle East, to do a presentation on Islam. Her first presentation offered basic information about Islam and about the Prophet Muhammad and a general differentiation of Islam from terrorism. Her points were that there is diversity in Islam and one must distinguish faiths from fundamentalisms,⁴⁰⁵ that Islam is a set of practices or a way of life rather than a Protestant view of faith as belief, and that Islam is a very egalitarian religion at its core. In an attempt to illustrate how the Qur'an is used differently than the Bible is and should be recited, Dorothy played a recording of the call to prayer. The next week, Dorothy presented some information on what the Qur'an has to say about women and made the point that the restrictive practices that these women found objectionable about Islam were actually the accretions of culture and not in the Qur'an. Dorothy had come prepared with an opinion piece by Maureen Dowd about how the same criticisms of Islam could be made of Catholicism and gave many arguments for how Islam was not any different from Christianity when it came to discrimination against women, like

⁴⁰³ William Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, 117.

⁴⁰⁴ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴⁰⁵ This point was drawn from Martin Marty's comments quoted in Krista Tippett's book, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters and How to Talk About It*, 152-157.

the one below.⁴⁰⁶

Dorothy: Anyway, what we are talking about is regulating sexual behavior and our religions do regulate sexual behavior. One of the reasons I started majoring in English was when I read *The Scarlet Letter*. And you know Hester walks out of that church with the scarlet letter on her chest and when you read it, did you ever think about the scoundrel who is responsible for that. And who gets blamed for it? It's Hester. And that *worm* never owns up to his part, until the very end. And of course that's what Hawthorne is telling us, we have the same double standards, we try to control our females too.... Oh one last thing on this, there's no text in the Qur'an that precludes women from any position of leadership except in leading prayer and women can lead prayer when it's women praying. And this one writer that I was reading this week said that she was in China and the Chinese Muslims have female imams, because they just do. They always have, as long as the females are not leading male worshippers. Which is really interesting because Teddy on Sunday was saying, "Christianity, of course has the tradition that women don't speak in church, right, Sara [the current pastor]?" (*Laughter*) Katie says, "Well, we speak softly." But we are all aware of the fact that in your lifetime and mine, we saw women being ordained. When I was chosen as an elder, my parents were a little askance...seriously...

Brenda: Dorothy, my mother said, I'm from Richmond, I called to tell her that I had been selected as an elder, because my older brother before me had been one. And there was silence. And she said, "Don't worry, honey, no one in Richmond will ever know." (*incredulous laughter*)⁴⁰⁷

Using her own experience, Brenda corroborates Dorothy's appraisal of Christianity as containing resistance to women's leadership. The group seemed convinced of Dorothy's argument because the discussion moved towards continuing discrimination against women in American society and moved away from the need to defend Islam against the charge of being discriminatory against women.

Throughout Dorothy's two weeks of presentations on Islam, most of the women

⁴⁰⁶ Maureen Dowd, "Worlds Without Women," April 10, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/11/opinion/11dowd.html?src=me&ref=opinion&r=0>. Accessed February 3, 2013. Dowd's argument could be seen as problematic considering the history of American Protestant and mainstream media depictions of Catholicism as backwards in terms of gender and sexuality (even though Dowd identifies as Catholic in the piece). One need only to refer to the early nineteenth-century convent tales as evidence of this connection. See Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk, *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales*, ed. with introduction by Nancy Lusignan Schultz (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999). Dorothy was using the argument to criticize Christianity more generally and not to privilege American Protestantism over Catholicism as the only enlightened religion in terms of gender roles.

⁴⁰⁷ Dames and the Divine meeting, April 14, 2010.

responded with simple informational questions about Muhammad or the Qur'an, but some of the women still had reservations about Islam; in particular, Islam's relationship to the secular Western world and treatment of women were unresolved for some of the women in the group. The next week, when Dorothy was not present, Elaine announced that after reading the materials that Dorothy had handed out she was still unconvinced that Islam had an egalitarian understanding of gender roles. Barbara had also missed Dorothy's presentation on women in Islam, and she brought an interview with Danish psychologist Nicolai Sennels for discussion.

Barbara: Well now, this fella is saying here "*Seen from a psychological and also humanistic perspective, it is very clear that people from different cultures have different needs when they have or create problems. My own experience is that Muslims don't understand our Western way*" (Denmark-Western way) "*of trying to handle conflicts through dialogue. They are raised in a culture with very different outer authorities and consequences. Western tradition using compromise and inner reflection as primary means of handling outer and inner conflicts is seen as weak in the Muslim culture. To a great extent, they simply don't understand this softer more humanistic way of handling social affairs. In the context of social work and politics, this means that they need more borders and stronger consequences to be able adjust their behavior.*" What do you think of that last sentence?

Elaine: That's an interesting article. Of course it starts with sweeping generalities, but it does get at the heart of the matter because you asked the question about culturally from the ground level [where do values come from]...And the other thing is that governmentally Western culture is a culture of laws and it's secular, and that's a culture of responses that doesn't adhere to our secular structure. The highest powers are the religious laws. It is a different way.⁴⁰⁸

This psychologist seemed to ascribe to Samuel Huntingdon's theories about Islam and the West being incompatible civilizations and to cast the non-Western Muslim subject as somehow less rational than the Western subjects. The group did belittle his argument that Denmark should use the money they are spending on integration to work on development in Muslim countries (essentially, he said that they should send the immigrants back). However, Elaine said later that this psychologist's explanation of Muslim culture as dealing with

⁴⁰⁸ Dames and the Divine meeting, April 21, 2010.

conflicts through aggressive outbursts explained some of the experiences she had traveling in Egypt. Furthermore, her characterization of the incompatibility of Western secular culture and Islamic religious culture shows how the women in this group still think of Islam as radically different from their own religiosity. Their Christianity is compatible with a secular state and Islam transgresses by entering into the realm of government. Their highest powers are religious, both in terms of government and in terms of individuals, and therefore the members of Muslim culture are unreasonable or even irrational. On the other hand, it is implicit that Christians are self-ruled and keep their religious convictions in the private sphere.

In contrast to these long, challenging conversations about Islam, the Dames and the Divine group had almost a reverence for Buddhism and easily accepted Buddhism as compatible with the values of Christianity with little discussion. The excerpt below was drawn from the end of the same discussion above about the Danish psychologist's views, when the group was trying to elect someone to lead the discussion on the next part of the book, which touched on Buddhism.

Elise: You know last week I heard Borg and Crossan. They were saying that the big distinction between Buddhism and Christianity was that Jesus taught *distributive* justice. In other words, there should be enough to go around, and the Buddhists do not ascribe to that apparently.

SLK: Well, there's a certain amount of accepting of suffering in this lifetime. It's not accepting of suffering as good...but the way to deal with it is through enlightenment. Not all, there's a lot of engaged Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh...

Elise: And they did say that he was an exception.

SLK: So modern Buddhist thinkers have changed that in some ways, but in terms of the core of Buddhism, there aren't...the Buddha didn't teach that we should...

Elise: Share...

SLK: Well I guess that's not the right word. Yes, kindness and compassion are part of Buddhism, but dealing with larger social problems is not.

Elise: That's their term, that there was no distributive...

Elaine: But I'll tell you, it's the Buddhists when the tsunami hit who took in people. And it's the Buddhists up there in China pawing through the rubble to save people. So I don't

- know about feeding people, but they sure are socially motivated to help people, the monks.
- Barbara: There was recently a television program, it was an hour long program on Buddhism. And Bob and I were just, we didn't even want to leave to get a drink of water or anything, because it was compelling. And we both agreed that we felt closer to the Buddhist religion as it was presented in that particular program than we had been any other religion. It seems to be so reasonable and calm. And I don't know, it's kind of accepting. Have you ever visited...?
- Elaine: I just think it's a way of living, a way of being. It's not...technically, I don't think it's as institutionalized as other religions, are *so* institutionalized. It doesn't try to rule other people, it just says here's how *you* live *your* life. And it's compassionate...
- Elise: Well if you got down to the basis of Christianity though, that would be...
- Elaine: Yeah, we've just institutionalized it...
- Elise: We've distorted it, it's just been...
- Elaine: ..but if you follow the teachings of Jesus..
- Elise: ...if we got back to what...
- Elaine: --yeah, a way of life...
- Eliase: ...it would be a totally different thing than what you perceive.⁴⁰⁹

In particular, Barbara and Elaine's reactions here to Buddhism seem to be completely opposite to their uncertainty about Islam earlier in the discussion. Barbara uses the words "reasonable" and "calm," probably without thinking of the contrast between this image of Buddhism and the images of Muslims as angry and unreasonable in the article she brought to the group just moments before, yet the contrast is stark. Elaine describes Buddhism as "a way of life" here as a positive characteristic, but when Dorothy used the same argument and language for Islam Elaine had not been convinced. The following week, the discussion centered less on Buddhism than on hope for social change in general, but Marian still asserted that "you can be a Christian and a Buddhist at the same time."⁴¹⁰ Marian's comment, to which several of the other women agreed in concert, distills the sentiments expressed in the conversation above and illustrates how unproblematic Buddhism is for the women in

⁴⁰⁹ Dames and the Divine meeting, April 21, 2010. As my comments suggest, I gave in to playing the role of "expert" that the Dames frequently wanted me to play in this discussion. Many of the women knew that I had recently been a teaching assistant for a course on Asian Religious Traditions, and they were trying to convince me to lead the next week's discussion.

⁴¹⁰ Dames and the Divine meeting, April 28, 2010.

Dames and the Divine compared to Islam.⁴¹¹

The responses that the Dames and the Divine had towards Buddhism and Islam respectively correspond with larger cultural views about Buddhism and Islam.⁴¹² One need only note the lack of stories about Buddhism in the news, except for the occasional mention of the Dalai Lama, in comparison to the omnipresence of stories about Islam to see which religion is considered a threat in American cultural consciousness. Neither was the Dames and the Divine group's difficulty with Islam atypical for the church of which the group was a part. While I was attending the Dames and the Divine meetings, their church hosted a Sunday afternoon talk about Islam, which attempted to present a defense of Islam and particularly to dispel notions about Islam being violent and oppressive to women. The responses to this presentation mirrored those of the Dames to the challenge of Islam in that there were comments in support of a view of Islam as internally diverse as well as comments that rejected this more tolerant view of Islam. For example, one man in particular stated he did not believe the presenter's argument that moderate Muslims had denounced the 9/11 attacks but that the media had not focused on this denunciation.⁴¹³

While Buddhism seems special in its ability to be combined innocuously with Christianity for the Dames, the very possibility of multiple religious belonging might be a

⁴¹¹ Brenda did tell me in a conversation that she found the idea that "everything is suffering" in Buddhism something that she could not accept, but I never heard anyone else share such resistance to Buddhism in the large group discussion beyond the mild critique that Elise offers here. Conversation with Brenda at Dames and the Divine Christmas breakfast, December 16, 2009.

⁴¹² In his chapter "Teaching Buddhism and Violence" in *Teaching Religion and Violence*, Brian Daizen Victoria "discusses the task of convincing a media-consumptive generation that the popular representations of Buddhism actually erase its history of fomenting and rationalizing violence. Associated in the popular imagination with the Dalai Lama, compassion, and meditation, Buddhism actually has a long history of entanglement with state power and military conflict that challenges students to unlearn the normative and sanitized versions of Buddhist teachings that suppress this side of the story" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

⁴¹³ Westminster Presbyterian Church Sunday afternoon, September 12, 2010

feature of their view of religious belonging as an individual choice. In “Dynamics of Religious Belonging,” Catherine Cornille suggests that the very possibility of multiple religious belonging in the West is tied to “the modern shift from a conception of truth and meaning framed in cosmology to one rooted in subjectivity that yields the radical sense of individual freedom and autonomy evident everywhere in Western culture today.”⁴¹⁴ This description might be an over-generalization, but the Dames and the Divine group is not far from her assessment that “individuals who no longer feel compelled to accept every single aspect of the tradition without question come to adopt a piecemeal approach to doctrine, symbols, and practices governed by personal judgment and taste.”⁴¹⁵ On the other hand, forms of religion that are irremediably “other” are cast as a threat to individual choice because of the ways that they limit the participation of women and transgress into the public sphere where they might have power to constrain the choices of others. Elaine’s continual characterization of “us” or Christianity as compatible with secularism and “them” or Islam as incompatible with this vision of society shows her investment in the idea that religion should be relegated to the private sphere. Despite their inclusive stance, both the Mysterion and Dames and the Divine groups still create boundaries between insiders and outsiders, between liberal and conservative Christians, between acceptable religions in a religiously plural society and those that are beyond the pale.

Good Religion is on the Inside

⁴¹⁴ Catherine Cornille, “Dynamics of Religious Belonging” in Catherine Cornille ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

The boundary between religious insiders and religious outsiders that I have described in all of the groups above coincides with definitions of good religion and bad religion that circulate in American culture. As Robert Orsi argues, good religion is associated with transparency, freedom, and enlightenment and bad religion is associated with anti-democratic leanings, coercion, and restraint.⁴¹⁶ Within this schema, which Tracy Fessenden argues has entered into American literary studies, “*all* visible forms of religion might easily be regarded as irrational, regressive, and threatening to the democratic project.”⁴¹⁷ As I have argued above, from the perspective of mainstream Protestant women, bad religion, as an imposition on the self from the outside, is a threat to the self. Good religion is an authentic expression of one’s interior being and as such it does not venture into the public sphere in order to impose one’s beliefs on others. The Breathing Space groups were mostly concerned about forms of Christianity that seem to focus on exterior realities and “legalism,” which is viewed as a coercive form of religion. For the Mysterion and the Dames and the Divine groups, bad religion restricted women’s roles, whether it is was Christianity or Islam, and Islam’s “way of life” that includes participation in the public sphere was seen as dangerous and threatening. Even in the Quinn Temple group, which generally felt that religion should be active in the public sphere, Jamie was wary of churches that focus on formalities and Mrs. Edmond felt that it was possible to keep one’s beliefs to oneself as your motivations for acting to feed the poor in the public sphere.

The critiques of religious outsiders as participants in bad religions that constrain the individual, which is particularly salient in the Breathing Space, Mysterion, and Dames and

⁴¹⁶ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. 177-204.

⁴¹⁷ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2-3.

the Divine groups, conform to the critiques of social identity that Linda Martin Alcoff describes as rampant in modern Western political thought. She argues that for moderns in the West, “social identity must be objectified and judged *before* a loyal attachment to it can be rational” and she gives as an example of someone who has not judged his or her attachment the Catholic who grew up in the tradition and has not considered other traditions.⁴¹⁸ This definition of religion as social or cultural identity is precisely the kind of religion that the Breathing Space and Dames and the Divine groups are guarded against. Both groups would certainly support a vision of religiosity as individual and would easily assent to the idea that the self-choosing subject should be at the center of anyone’s practice of religion. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the Dames are so accepting of Buddhism, which has been cast as an individualized, contemplative religion in their experience, and dismissive of the version of Islam that is representative of a whole culture or society. As a way of trying to separate “good” Islam from “bad” Islam, Brenda even mentioned that the way to understand Islam on its own terms was to separate Islam as a religion from Islam as a political project.⁴¹⁹

Furthermore, Alcoff argues that because Western philosophical thought has assumed that what comes to the individual from the social is necessarily constraining, we need “an account of *when* the other poses a threat rather than the existential universalizing of this threat to every self/other relationship.”⁴²⁰ In other words, it is necessary to note “the real differences in the extent and manner of threat” depending on the social location of a

⁴¹⁸ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54.

⁴¹⁹ Dames and the Divine meeting, April 7, 2010.

⁴²⁰ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self*, 70. Emphasis added.

particular social identity.⁴²¹ Alcoff suggests that it is white male identity, or the dominant social identity, that feels threatened by the power of the Other to form a constitutive part of one's identity. My experience in these Protestant women's reading groups shows that one can add "Protestant" to the dominant social identity position that views society as a threat to the individual formation of the self. The women in the Dames and Divine group implicitly put the highest value on a concept of the self unencumbered by institutions and religious authority and use this criterion to evaluate all religions, including their own. It is possible that this vision of the unencumbered self is held most strongly by this group because of their dominant location in terms of class and race compared to the other groups I attended. In contrast, while it was only mentioned in one discussion, the Quinn Temple group did not feel it necessary to interrogate Islam as a threat to women or civil society.⁴²² It is possible that the women in the Quinn Temple group were more comfortable with Islam because of personal interactions with African-American Muslims, although I never saw any evidence of such involvement. It is more likely that as African-American women, the Quinn Temple women are used to navigating society visibly marked by their social identity and the ideal of the unencumbered self did not seem to be under threat when they considered Islam.

The concept that the privilege given to a dominant position in society is that it functions as the unmarked category is relevant here. Protestant religious identity in which religious belief has been chosen and is its most authentic in private is unremarkable and therefore passes unseen, even when it is present in the public sphere. Protestantness is then like whiteness, whose privilege is to be unmarked as a social identity yet pervasive in its

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Rhonda did not identify herself to me as feminist, however she referenced womanist scholarship in the first lesson that she led with the group on January 27, 2010 and energetically joined conversations that championed women's leadership in the church.

invisible power to shape what is seen as neutral or universal. Minority identities, in this case race and minority religious observance in the case Muslim women's use of the veil, that are immediately marked as socially-derived and the white Protestant identity that appears unencumbered and autonomous. As Wendy Brown states, "the mechanics of this evocation are familiar: homosexuals discursively appear as more thoroughly defined by their sexuality and hence less capable of participation in the universal than are heterosexuals, just as Jews, Catholics, Mormons, and Muslims appear more relentlessly saturated by their religious/ethnic identity than are other Americans."⁴²³ The privilege that the women in the *Dames and the Divine* experience as occupying completely unmarked social identities as white, affluent, Protestant women does not allow them to see the ways in which their identities are socially-derived and not fully autonomous.

Moreover, the invisibility of Protestantness contributes to the definition of secularism. Scholars have begun to note that Western "secularism" is profoundly influenced by Christianity and by Protestantism in particular.⁴²⁴ In her book *Culture and Redemption*, Tracy Fessenden demonstrates "how particular forms of Protestantism emerged as an 'unmarked category' in American religious and literary history" in order to show how a Protestantized conception of religion controls both the meaning of the religious and the secular.⁴²⁵ Saba Mahmood also characterizes the assumptions that secularism entails about religion in terms that support Protestant conceptions of religion.

"Secularism, often reduced to its doctrinal principal (the separation of church and state), operates here as a sociocultural project, authorizing a privatized form of religious

⁴²³ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*, 186.

⁴²⁴ See Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) for an analysis of Western secularism in relationship to religion.

⁴²⁵ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*, 6.

subjectivity that owes its allegiance to the sovereign state (rather than to traditional religious authority). Importantly, the autonomous individual is the protagonist animating this secular liberal model of religiosity, a self-choosing subject who might appreciate the spiritual truths religious traditions symbolize but is enlightened enough to understand that these truths command no epistemological or political force in this world.”⁴²⁶

If only Protestant privatized religion can be autonomous, the brands of “religious” or “fundamentalist” indicate types of bad social identification that constrain the individual and therefore place outsiders beyond the pale of liberalism. As Wendy Brown notes, ““we” have culture while culture has “them,” or we *have* culture while they *are* a culture...This asymmetry turns on an imagined opposition between culture and individual moral autonomy, in which the former vanquishes the latter unless culture is itself subordinated by liberalism.”⁴²⁷ Since social identity is in itself suspect, religious identity becomes the ultimate state of being “had” by culture and being in a state of unfreedom.

Part of what Wendy Brown is displaying when she characterizes liberalism as a discourse of oppositions in which the outsider are constrained by their cultural position and the insider freely chooses it, is that this definition of us and them is portable and versatile. This structure of oppositions means that it can be reproduced in several different contexts with very different ends. Brown describes that this opposition underwrites George W. Bush’s appeal to his faith in God “as a source of strength and moral guidance for his deliberations and decisions, while the devotee of Allah is assumed to be without the individual will and conscience necessary for such ratiocination.”⁴²⁸ So, evangelicals in the Breathing Space group can say that liberal Protestants and other religions are the ones who are ruled by “legalism” and that evangelicals are the ones who choose their religiosity. At

⁴²⁶ Saba Mahmood, “Religion, Feminism and Empire: The New Ambassadors of Islamophobia,” in *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion*, Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 94.

⁴²⁷ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*, 151.

⁴²⁸ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*, 154.

the same time, liberal Protestants can criticize Christians for restraining women's freedom and Islam for being too political and reserve authentic spirituality for themselves and Buddhists. It also explains how evangelical women like the Breathing Space group are both in the dominant position because they enjoy the privilege of an interiorized Protestant faith, but might also be correct in their sense that non-evangelicals are wary of aspects of evangelicalism that venture into the public sphere, like evangelism, that appear too religious to be the actions of rational subjects with an autonomous will.⁴²⁹

The portability these oppositions also leads to the question of in what ways does culture *have* feminist discourse? In what ways does feminism construct a discourse in which *we* have culture and culture has *them*? Feminists can ignore both liberal and conservative religious groups as either heteronomous subjects if they do not choose their religiosity and “peripheral” to feminist discourse if they do choose their religious beliefs. In other words, *they* have religion whether it is good or bad religion, while feminists do not, even though the secularity of feminist discourse is controlled by Protestant definitions of what religion is and is not. Tracy Fessenden's critique, that secularism has entered American literary studies and “religion therefore fails to warrant the kinds of attention we give to other social formations in American literary history, including gender, race, sexuality, and class,” could easily be leveled at feminist studies of the subject.⁴³⁰ Saba Mahmood and Wendy Brown and others have critiqued the ways in which feminism and secularism have become bedfellows in service of imperialism, but feminist studies of the subject do not consider religion a category

⁴²⁹ According to Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “the Christian right develops its political and cultural power ‘both by drawing on its connection to the Christian aspect (itself supported by mainline Protestantism) of hegemonic Christian secularism and by claiming to be oppressed by the same secularism.’” Quoted in Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*, 214.

⁴³⁰ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion the Secular, and American Literature*, 2.

of analysis unless the focus is on how assumptions about religion contribute to discourses about Islam and women overseas.⁴³¹ Alcoff herself, in her work to expose the assumption of threat that comes from socially-derived identities, includes religious identity in her examples every so often, but is primarily concerned with race and gender as social dimensions constitutive of the self. One would be hard-pressed to find feminist theorists outside of religious studies who interrogate the secularist assumptions of their work. Without attention to this way that feminist theory is a socially-constructed standpoint that includes assumptions about religion however, feminist theorists of the subject invite the danger of unreflectively reproducing the hierarchy between good and bad religion, secularism and religion, or “us” and “them.”

Instead of chronicling how religion or reflexivity about secularism is absent from feminist works, it is more instructive to see how feminist discourses are pressed in to service of defining outsiders among the lay feminists in these reading groups. The objections to Islam that seem to have the most salience in the Dames and the Divine’s discussions were that, as these women understood it, Islam rejects the project of secularism and that Islam oppresses women (though there was some disagreement about whether it oppresses women any more than does Christianity). In many ways, the women in the Dames and the Divine group cannot be faulted for struggling to discern an inclusive stance when they are barraged with Islamophobic messages in the media regularly. However, it should give us pause that the most feminist of the groups in my study is the most unable to resist the larger cultural narratives about Islam. Feminism was not the only contributor to these Islamophobic

⁴³¹ See Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 188-89; Saba Mahmood, “Religion, Feminism and Empire.” See also Tracy Fessenden’s chapter on Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Culture and Redemption*; Amira Jamarkani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) for the link between feminism and empire.

narratives, but neither did it provide any conceptual framework from which these narratives can be questioned. In this regard, J.Z. Smith's commentary and narration of the problems with encountering an "other world" in the "discovery" of America leads him to another observation useful in deciphering the problems the Dames had with the Muslim other. He says that, "the 'other' emerges only as a theoretical issue when it is perceived as challenging a complex and intact world-view."⁴³² From this perspective, the Dames' difficulties begin to make sense. The inclusive Christianity that the Dames are so ready to embrace and champion is predicated on an understanding of religious pluralism that is bound to secularism and feminism.

The Breathing Space and Quinn Temple groups did not use feminist discourses in order to draw a boundary between themselves and religious outsiders, though the groups had different relationships to feminist and secularist discourses. The women in the Quinn Temple group regularly used gender in their analysis of social situations, but may not have identified as feminist if asked.⁴³³ It is not unusual that black women would disassociate themselves feminism, feeling that "white" is understood before the word feminism and that white feminism does not speak to the range of their concerns.⁴³⁴ Moreover, the fact that African-American Protestants have not had the same privilege as white Protestants to pass unmarked racially and by extension religiously in society may contribute to the de-prioritization of an understanding of religion as primarily a private matter. On the other hand, the Breathing Space groups did not identify as feminist and for the most part completely

⁴³² Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," 269.

⁴³³ A prime example of this was Jamie's mother, wife of retired pastor, who was quick to empathize with my own experience of feeling marginalized because of my gender at an academic conference, but may have been more conservative in other ways.

⁴³⁴ For just a small sample of the critiques of white feminism by black feminism or womanism see "The Cohambee River Collective Statement" in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2010).

shied away from discussing the issue of the treatment of women in society or in the church. Nonetheless, within the posture of conversion in which individual privatized belief is prized, the Breathing Space women valued the religiosity of Muslim women, using the term “God-fearer” to express a certain kinship with Muslims. It is notable that even though the Breathing Space women value interiorized religion to the same extent (if not more in certain ways) as the Dames and the Divine group, their rejection of feminist discourse may actually allow them to incorporate “them” into “us” more easily, even when “they” are definitely beyond the boundary of evangelicalism. To be clear, the privatized definition of religion in evangelicalism can still be used for imperialistic ends as the example above of George W. Bush attests and Bush himself engaged in much of the “saving brown women from brown men” discourse to support the war in Afghanistan.⁴³⁵ Nonetheless, the women in the Breathing Space group do not consider Islam as threatening to their religious identity as is liberal Christianity and the discourse of the oppression of women is not their first line of attack against religious outsiders.

In many of the instances of the boundaries between inside and out in the groups above, the groups show what J.Z. Smith calls a “collective capacity to think of, and think away, the differences we create.”⁴³⁶ For instance, the Breathing Space group uses the category of “legalism” to indicate religious approaches that are clearly on the outside and as the state from which those who are believers have been definitively delivered. At the same time, it seems that believers can wander into legalism or legalistic approaches to God without

⁴³⁵ This phrase originally appears in Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths eds. 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). For an article in response to the rhetoric of feminism used to support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, see Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others.” *American Anthropologist, New Series*. Vol. 104, No. 3, 783-790.

⁴³⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Differential Equations On Constructing the Other,” 242.

losing their status as insiders (though of course they need to then be put back on the correct path). The Quinn Temple group seems to have much more porous boundaries between themselves and those on the outside, but people on the inside can still “allow the devil to work through them” as Jamie’s example with her former supervisor shows. The boundaries between religious insiders and outsiders are deployed for specific ends and therefore the boundaries can shift depending on what ends are in view. As J.Z. Smith warns in both his essays on the relationship between self and other, we must avoid theories of the other in which “the other” is an ontological category as opposed to a relational category.⁴³⁷ What can feminism offer in the place of the discourses that the women in Dames and the Divine group hear about Islam that paint Muslims as absolutely other and unassimilable into Western ways of life as if there were some ontological difference between Muslims and Westerners? Feminist discourses about agency in which there is an “other” in social identities in relation to whom women are either exercising their power to resist or to submit will not provide such an alternative discourse. That socially-derived other, whether it is located in religion or in a socially-derived identity, must be understood as not an ontological other but an other that shifts within changing political, social and economic situations. Ultimately, the boundary between self and other is constantly shifting ground and if feminist discernment of agency is dependent on determining whether women are resisting or submitting to others, the definition of agency will be persistently unstable.

⁴³⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Differential Equations On Constructing the Other,” 241 and “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” 275.

Conclusion:
Genres of Texts and Genres of Co-Agency in Protestant Women's Reading Groups

Let us return to the Tuesday evening in mid-January with which I began this dissertation. The gathered members of the *Mysterion* group--Christina, Emily, Sarah, and Diane—enacted a variety of modalities of engagement in their reading of chapters ten and eleven of the book *Mark* that night. First, even before they sat down to read together, they shared stories of what was happening in their lives and Christina described how reading Barbara Brown Taylor's spiritual memoir about leaving the pastorate was influencing how Christina herself was interpreting her own situation as she prepared to enter ordained ministry. Then, as they approach the text to which these women ascribe ultimate authority in their spiritual lives, these women's interpretive acts display a variety of ways of relating to the "otherness" present in the text. When faced with the descriptions of normative perspectives in the text, the women struggled to reconcile their experiences with the text's pronouncement against divorce and did not succeed, maintaining the tension between themselves and the text. Nonetheless, when interpreting the statement that one must be like a child to enter the kingdom of God, the women were enthusiastic in their desire to recognize their childlike dependence on God. Finally, when encountering the narrative description of Jesus's cursing of the fig tree, Diane tried to explain this action by imagining herself in Jesus's place and imagining that Jesus was taking out his anxieties about his coming crucifixion on the fig tree.⁴³⁸

Like this Tuesday evening gathering, the scenes of religious reading that I have described in the preceding chapters display modalities of agency that arise in engagement

⁴³⁸ *Mysterion* meeting, January 12, 2010.

with physical, textual, and imagined others. The differences in these modalities derive from the differences in the others that are engaged as well as differences in the dispositions out of which the women in these groups approached others. The metaphors of tonality drawn from music and visual art are helpful in describing the tones, moods, and shades of difference between these kinds of agency because none of these descriptors are mutually exclusive. When two tones are heard together it is hard to determine where one tone begins and another ends and likewise shades of colors intermingle as we move from one color to the other. Approaches to agency that attempt to disentangle the self and the other by determining whether the self is the cause (autonomous) or the other is the cause (heteronomous) of any given effect seem to see the world only in clearly demarcated realms of black and white. To put it more theoretically and less musically, these modalities of interactions between the individual and others comprise different characteristics of co-agency that co-determine effects and co-construct the self.

Therefore, in each of the chapters of this dissertation, I have adumbrated particular shades or modalities of co-agency in Protestant women's reading groups. In chapter one, I describe the practice of listening to and reading personal narratives as also an occasion for the narration of one's own narratives. As in the case of Christina hearing aspects of her own relationship with her mother in Anne Lamott's narration of this relationship, the women hear their own stories and the stories of others together and the interpretation of each story is influenced by the other.⁴³⁹ I called this practice "finding resonance" to indicate the subtlety of the influence that the life story one individual has on another's in this process. The practice of finding resonance tells us that meaning-making and self-definition can be

⁴³⁹ Mysterion meeting, September 22, 2009.

enriched by others without being over-determined by others and without appropriating the stories of others. In other words, autonomy and heteronomy are not the appropriate words to describe the intertwined nature of self and other.

In the example of Christina narrating her own difficult relationship with her mother and sense of both relief and loss at her departure in connection with Anne Lamott's narration of her own loss of her difficult mother after a protracted illness, the layers of resonance between the stories are interlaced and cannot be isolated without significantly changing the story that Christina tells about herself and her mother. This kind of narrative practice opens up the possibility for co-agency, or more than one actor contributing to create one effect or one narrative. Furthermore, the kind of co-agency that is operative in the practice of finding resonance is mostly characterized by agents working together to construct a story, even if the two agents are not synchronous in the case of the writers of spiritual memoirs and their readers. More often, the women in these groups are co-narrators of each other's personal narratives as they build intimacy through and alongside their reading practices.

In chapter two, the modality of co-agency that appears in the practice of "wallowing in and struggling with" doctrinal texts entails more friction between text and the reader, even though in many cases the women set out to merge themselves into the text seamlessly. In this case, the multiplicity of possible actors present in the collective reading practice of wallowing in a text makes the intended effect of internalization of the perspectives of the text uncertain and the causes of the actual effects of the religious reading practice difficult to ascertain. In other words, these doctrinal texts are supposed to have profound effects on religious adherents' subjectivities through the internalization of the viewpoints and dispositions in the texts. Yet the women in the Breathing Space, Quinn Temple and Dames

and Divine groups approach these doctrinal texts both through wallowing in the text and struggling with the perspectives in the text. These practices expose the unevenness of the internalization of religious texts even when the readers are intending to adopt the perspectives the texts promote. For instance, the Dames and the Divine approached the book of Mark through their *lectio divina* practice hoping to be changed by their ruminatory reading, but instead they had to acknowledge the distance between their experiences of prayer and Jesus's exhortation to ask and believe that your prayers will be answered.⁴⁴⁰

I argue that this unevenness is a result of the multiple perspectival horizons in which the women in these groups are situated. In essence, as Linda Martin Alcoff argues, the multiplicity of socially-derived foundations of the self means that even religious perspectives that are intended to form a global perspective in an individual's life remain open to competing representations of reality. As Linda Zerilli argues through Hannah Arendt, the multiplicity of the actors in this process refracts the effects of the act of interpretation, as all action in does, since we act in the social sphere. The practice of reading doctrinal texts therefore reminds us of the sociality of all action, which is only meaningful in interaction with others who make it impossible for us to control the effects of our actions. In any given reading group, there are other women present, including in many cases women who hold institutional leadership, the texts themselves exert some influence, and the women bring the influences of others into the group through the narration of their own experiences. For example, Tanya's own willingness to criticize John Piper's expectation of total delight in Jesus in this lifetime opened up the possibility for others in the group to talk about their experiences of being frustrated with Jesus.⁴⁴¹ All of these actors contribute to the

⁴⁴⁰ Dames and the Divine meeting, November 18, 2009.

⁴⁴¹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, October 28, 2009.

construction of individual perspectives and engagements with the text, both through their support and resistance.

Nonetheless, the relationship with the other that is displayed in the practices of struggling with and wallowing in a doctrinal text is modally different from the relationship with the other I described in the practice of finding resonance in another woman's story. Struggling with a text affirms the desire to accept a religious perspective while at the same time acknowledging other perspectives that are possibly incompatible yet deeply held. This is a kind of radical openness to the other that remains open even while embracing the tension between the self and the other. As a result, the modality of agency in struggling with a perspective is qualitatively different from a resonance that engenders an intertwining of personal narratives and also is qualitatively different from simple resistance or rejection of perspectives from outside the self. The disposition to wallow in the text provides the pre-condition for struggling with a text, so that even when women's experiences do not confirm the text at all, they find ways to interpret the text in meaningful ways. Ultimately, Jerry could have simply said that prayer does not move mountains and therefore the text in Mark was wrong, but instead she asserted that, "My mountain moved," in response to prayer about how to solve the conflict she was having with her sister.⁴⁴²

As I argue in chapter three, the relationship between the self and the other represented in the religious text is also different in the case of reading biblical narratives, which is characterized by a playful practice of imagining oneself in the world of the text. In this case, that which is other in the text provides a space in which the self can imagine other ways of being. The modality of agency that this imaginative relationship engenders is one in which effects are not the ultimate goal. In other words, while there may be unintended effects of

⁴⁴² Dames and the Divine meeting, November 18, 2009.

this reading practice in terms of the individual readers lives and senses of self, the readers themselves engage the text in a playful mode that is not serious and is not intended to have an effect on the self, unlike the practice of wallowing in doctrinal texts. To take two key examples of such play: The Thursday Breathing Space group and the Mysterion group were both reading narrative parts of the Bible, the book of Exodus and the gospels of Mark and John, respectively. The narrative structure of these texts invited a kind of reading in which the women imagined themselves as present in the world of the text and specifically as different characters within the text. The women in these groups imagined themselves as characters with whom they are not supposed to relate to in terms of religious perspectives, such as Pharaoh or Pontius Pilate.⁴⁴³ These women are therefore not entering into these characters in order to model themselves into these characters' religious perspectives or even identifying with the similarities they find between themselves and the characters.

These imaginative engagements with characters in a narrative remind us of the role of the imagination in the *potentiality* for creative action. Following Paul Ricoeur's description of entering the world of the text through reading as "imaginative variations of the ego," I argue that this playful reading is a kind of exercise that stretches one's capacity for different ways of seeing the world through engaging the imaginative aspect crucial to the potential modality of action. In the reading of biblical characters, the creativity of action, while implicitly suggesting the creation of something new *ex nihilo*, can be nurtured through the exploration of something given. The modality of agency in imaginative practice operates in a realm that is separated from the world of causes and effects, and the practice of reading religious narratives highlights the relationship between agency and imaginative

⁴⁴³ Breathing Space Thursday meeting, February 11, 2010; Mysterion meeting, August 24, 2010.

interpretation. In the case of reading biblical narratives, the text helps the reader to construct other worlds that may or may not look anything like the world of the text. The co-construction or co-agency in this case is present in the primary sociality that provides the conditions for agency and might be described as the imaginative modality of agency.

In the conversations about religious insiders and outsiders analyzed in chapter four, the disposition towards the imagined religious other differed considerably in these groups of women depending on their affiliation with different types of American Protestantism and therefore offer different styles of engagement with the religious other. These dispositions grew out of how these women understood their own group's identity and the relationship of their communities to other religious communities and to the larger society in which their community is situated. In other words, their understandings of themselves colored their relationships with others who were understood as religious outsiders. In particular, their viewpoints about who was inside and outside entailed assumptions about the role of culture or society in religious identity and whether the "other" represented by society is a threat to the self. When society or social forms of identity are considered a threat to the self, the women in my study cast religious outsiders as especially socially determined and heteronomous. In addition, the heteronomous situation of the other threatens to contaminate the autonomy of the self. For instance, in the white Protestant understanding (both liberal and conservative), the authentic religious experience is one that originates from the individual rather than from communal or cultural influences. These assumptions shaped the conditions in which one approached religious difference and the dispositions for interpreting the actions of religious outsiders. Therefore, religious outsiders who are identified by their different cultural identity such as other Protestants, Catholics and especially Muslims become

dangerous for one's own religious authenticity. The assumption that the other is a threat to the self influences the interactions with the other and restricts possibilities for a modality of co-agency in which effects are co-constructed through resonance rather than dissonance.

In contrast, in the African-American Quinn Temple group, authentic religious experience was not separated from social identity and, as Ms. Edmond argued, religious outsiders should be allies in working towards the good of the community.⁴⁴⁴ Individuals inside and outside of the Quinn Temple or the AME Christian community could both be a help or a hindrance to the community's ability to be authentically religious, or in Jamie's words, to be who God wants us to be. For example, Jamie interpreted the fact that her supervisor was working against her as an instance in which her supervisor was allowing the devil to work through her.⁴⁴⁵ From Jamie's perspective, the threat in this situation is the devil, who stands in for ways of acting that are destructive to the community that can be enacted by individuals inside the religious community. In other words, responsibility is somewhat displaced from the supervisor herself since allowing the devil to work through her describes a heteronomous situation in which the devil is the one who acts and yet at the same time the supervisor is "allowing" this to happen. Jamie interpreted the fact that her supervisor is acting to some degree heteronomously as an occasion for generosity and not a cause for separation, since she later reconciled with this woman and never considers her a non-Christian or religious outsider. Jamie thereby recognized that any individual in the community could allow the devil to work through them for a time. Neither the social foundations of religious identity nor the very fact of heteronomy were intrinsically threatening to Jamie's understanding what it means to be a Christian.

⁴⁴⁴ Quinn Temple meeting, February 10, 2010.

⁴⁴⁵ Quinn Temple meeting, November 11, 2009.

Ultimately, my analysis in this last chapter argues that some of the difficulties with religious women's agency in feminist scholarship derive from the continued characterization of "good religion" as chosen and peripheral to the subject and "bad religion" as originating in cultural identities that originate outside the self. I demonstrate how a conception of the self in which the social "other" is a threat to the authenticity of the self is aligned with a particularly white and Protestant conception of the threat to the self from social forms of religion. This conception of the self residually persists in secular feminist (and some religious feminist) scholarship when it assumes that the secular self is unencumbered by socially derived perspectives on religion. In other words, secular feminist scholarship that assumes that religious identity is peripheral to the self can participate in white Protestant definitions of religion to the exclusion more marginal definitions. What a study of religious reading and accounts of religious agency can offer us are kinds of engagement with the social and religious other and openness to the other that do not consider the other a threat. All of these modalities of agency in religious reading describe kinds of mutuality or reciprocity with the other and some of them, such as struggling with a text, also contain mutuality even as tension or dissonance with the other is also maintained. Agency is always exercised in engagement with others, never alone, and there are as possibly as many ways to be an agent as there are others with whom we co-construct our selves and our worlds. Feminist thought is impoverished if it does not engage religious others and the experiences of religious women in the project of constructing alternative feminist visions of our world together.

Beyond the Zero-Sum Game of Religious Women's Agency

This entire project has woven ethnographic and theoretical analyses in and out of each other, trying to provide points of connection. In this section of the conclusion, I move

into a more theoretical mode in order to describe the disruptions that my ethnographic context provides for feminist theories of the subject and of agency and the new terrains of thought that are opened up by this disruption. Looking back over the kinds of relationships between self and other and the modalities of agency inherent in the reading practices of these groups of women, it is apparent that the model of religious women's agency that describes agency as exercised in a zero-sum game between the self and the other is untenable.

The term "zero-sum" is used by game theorists to describe games of pure conflict in which one player wins and one player loses.⁴⁴⁶ In this type of game, what player one gains is commensurate with what the opposing player loses and therefore the sum of their payoffs is zero. This image is helpful in illustrating the problems inherent in the dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy that is often used as a rubric when feminist scholars describe and analyze the experiences of religious women. In this dichotomy, autonomy and heteronomy are imagined as states in which one is totally self-determining or totally ruled by an other. As a binary, one can only be in one state or another and so theorists like Linda Martín Alcoff, Lois McNay, and ethicist Elizabeth Bucar have tried build models of social identity and women's agency that describe how women can be both autonomous and heteronomous.⁴⁴⁷ Yet the assumption for these theorists is still that the aspects of the self that are in the control of the other cannot also be in control of the self and therefore the task of finding women's

⁴⁴⁶ Ken Binmore, *Game Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). I have also heard this term used in Christian theological discussions about divine agency in relationship to individual will or scientific explanations of natural events. See William Placher ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 56 and 116-133.

⁴⁴⁷ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Creative Conformity: the Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

agency is the task of ceding space from the other for the self. In reality, however, the construction of the self is much more than a zero-sum game, since “the games we play in real life are seldom games of pure conflict.”⁴⁴⁸

Nonetheless, throughout this dissertation I have engaged aspects of Alcoff, Zerilli and Willett’s conceptions of agency and the social construction of the self because of the aspects of agency in relationship to social others that they foreground in their accounts.⁴⁴⁹ Linda Martín Alcoff’s account of the social foundations of the raced and gendered self provides us with two insights. First, like Kelly Oliver, she argues that the role of the other in the formation of self need not be understood as a relationship of conflict in which the other is a threat to rationality or to autonomy.⁴⁵⁰ Alcoff demonstrates how the distrust of social influences on the self has deep roots in the Enlightenment and touches many aspects of our political discourse. At the same time, Alcoff builds an account in which the social foundations of the self situate the individual in social-perspectival horizons that ground the very possibility of seeing and knowing.

Within this account, Alcoff’s second insight is that each individual is situated in multiple perspectival horizons that sometimes clash and create strong dissonances in an individual’s understanding of the world. Alcoff argues that the fact of this multiplicity creates space so that one is not over-determined by any one social-perspectival horizon. In contrast, I want to argue that the multiplicity present in the social construction of the self

⁴⁴⁸ Ken Binmore, *Game Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 10.

⁴⁴⁹ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*; Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Cynthia Willett, “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence: Freedom in Analytic, Postmodern, and Pragmatist Feminisms,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* (Spring 2003); Cynthia Willett, “Visionary Pragmatism and the Ethics of Connectivity: An Alternative to Autonomy” in *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, ed. Maurice Hamington and Celia N. Bardwell Jones (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁵⁰ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001)

loosens the correlations between causes and effects in the relationship between self and other. Unlike the zero-sum game, in which the effects of any given engagement can be represented by slicing up a pie and doling out pieces to the individuals involved, the results of the engagement of self and other in religious reading practices could be multiply attributed or not attributed to anyone at all. This is where Linda Zerilli's reminder that action in the social sphere inherently implies non-sovereignty since we cannot predict or control what others will do with our actions with certainty becomes useful.⁴⁵¹ The more actors in a situation, the more difficult it becomes to correlate one cause with one effect.

Finally, Cynthia Willett's reliance on African-American pragmatist thought in order to conceptualize "what it is to be a person first and foremost from our immersion in relationships" provides an account in which the core of the self is not necessarily rooted in the ability to make an effect on the world.⁴⁵² Rather, the self is rooted in the "erotic" capacity for creative work and the capacity to make meaningful social bonds. Therefore, freedom is not being free of influence from others, but the opposite, the freedom to engage with others in meaningful ways. I argue through the scenes of reading I have described in Protestant women's reading groups that it is more useful to speak of styles of engagement with the other or modalities of co-agency than to look for the effects of various others (individual, social, or divine) on religious women's ability to act.

If we move beyond conceptions of religious women's agency that presume that the engagement with various others must result in a "zero-sum," space opens up for theories of agency in which more than one actor co-constructs the self and effects in the social sphere. While I prefer the term co-agency because of how it emphasizes the intersubjective and

⁴⁵¹ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴⁵² Cynthia Willett, "Visionary Pragmatism and the Ethics of Connectivity: An Alternative to Autonomy," 261.

simultaneous nature of agency with the other, Mark Hobart's analysis of "complex agency" in the Balinese context sketches out a model of agency that entertains the possibility of the co-construction of effects and different ways of participating in those effects besides being an "agent."⁴⁵³ In contrast with imagining the agency of a collectivity as if that collectivity were an individual agent, Hobart's concept of a complex agent describes how multiple agents might produce an effect in a process that is elaborated over time in such way that different people might move into different roles at different points in the process. In Hobart's view, a complex agent encompasses not only the way that different individuals might take up the position of agent at different times, but also the way that instruments and patients contribute to the efficacy of an action. Furthermore, the description of who is an agent is largely based on the interpretation of the outcome, but "precisely what the outcome signifies is still always open to contestation."⁴⁵⁴

The ethnographic example that Hobart uses to elaborate his idea of complex agency is too lengthy to recount in detail here, but I will sketch a few of the ways that the Balinese example resonates with the modalities of co-agency or styles of engagement with others in Protestant women's reading groups. The situation that Hobart describes begins with series of signs in the local temple interpreted as the actions of the temple deity and culminates with the

⁴⁵³ Mark Hobart, "The Patience of Plants: A Note on Agency in Bali." *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 24 (1990): 90-135. In "Who Do You Think You Are? The Authorized Balinese" in *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, ed. Richard Fardon (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1990), Hobart critiques Western accounts of agency in contrast to the accounts Balinese give themselves. For an application of Hobart's complex agency to non-Balinese contexts, see Laurie Patton, "When the Fire Goes Out, The Wife Shall Fast: Notes on Women's Agency in the Asvalayana Grhya Sutra," in *Problems in Sanskrit and Vedic Literature*, ed. Maitreyee Deshpande (Delhi: New Indian Book Center, 2004), 294-305, and Corinne Kratz, "Forging Unions and Negotiating Ambivalence: Personhood and Complex Agency in Okiek Marriage Arrangement" in *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, ed. Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 2000). I owe my introduction to Hobart's essays to their engagement with him in their work.

⁴⁵⁴ Mark Hobart, "The Patience of Plants," 108

public reading of the chronicle of the temple's founding. A high caste priest in the nearest city is consulted, but ultimately he declines to attend the reading and the representative of the local royal family agrees to attend the reading. The reading is deemed effective by the people and the problem of the unhappiness of the local deity is seen as solved in that no more village meetings about it seem necessary.

In this example, the complex agent includes the deity who initiates the crisis, the village who decides what to do about it and forms the audience of the reading, the high caste priest who declines because of not having enough power for the situation, the royal representative whose family was involved in the founding of the temple and whose presence is necessary for the reading to happen, and possibly even the chronicle itself, whose reading is deemed the solution for the crisis. Within a traditional understanding of agency, in which one cause is linked to one effect, there are multiple interpretations possible for who is the effective agent in the situation, but in reality all of those involved contribute. Furthermore, there are those who could be interpreted as playing the role of instrument or patient, like the villagers, the royal representative, or the chronicle, have an integral part to play in the process.

The role of being present or being a witness is a way of co-producing the event and like the scenes of reading I have described in this dissertation, the manner in which one is present can make a difference in the outcome.⁴⁵⁵ It mattered whether or not the women in the groups I attended approached the engagement with their religious texts intending to “wallow” in the texts since “wallowing” in a text is a precondition for “struggling with” a text rather

⁴⁵⁵ Kelly Oliver constructs a theory of subjectivity in which “witnessing is the essential dynamic of all subjectivity, its constitutive event and process” and even further, is necessary to restore subjectivity after trauma in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7. I agree with her but also want to articulate specifically how witnessing might represent a kind of agency.

than an outright rejection of it. The disposition with which the women approach these texts affects the outcome of their reading practice, mitigating the effects of the competing perspectival horizons that they experience. In other words, the competing realities experienced (i.e. being frustrated with Jesus rather than delighted with him in this lifetime or not being able to move mountains through prayer) contribute to the outcome of the reading practice but do not over-determine it.

Similarly, the disposition towards the other in the case of whether or not the social foundation of the self is considered a threat certainly affects the outcome of engagement with religious others. At a very basic level, these different ideas about the social foundations of the self and different levels of threat from religious outsiders contributed to the outcomes of my research. The Quinn Temple's pragmatic willingness to include a variety of theological perspectives and to work with religious and racial outsiders for social justice enabled my access to this group, despite my different racial identity. The *Mysterion and Dames* and the *Divine* groups were welcoming of me as a religious studies and feminist scholar, since they shared my feminist commitments and wanted to share in a kind of cosmopolitan openness to other religions. Yet, had I been a non-Christian (or especially a Muslim) researcher my acceptance in the group would likely have been different (and probably would have devolved even more into the role of "expert witness" in the defense of Islam). Finally, the *Breathing Space* group's concern with the in-authenticity of liberal Protestant religious identity and my desire not to produce a narrative of personal affective experience of Jesus may have affected my reception in their groups and what I was privy to. I anticipated that my identification as a feminist would bar me from my research setting, but my anticipation of rejection also kept me from articulating my personal experience in some settings and therefore from establishing

intimacy with my informants. Ultimately, my research demonstrates that feminist predispositions toward religious women as heteronomous might also predispose us to look for signs of agency, like resistance or the effects of action in particular, among religious women.

Moreover, the secularist presumptions of feminist research on religious women may predispose us to misunderstand the way that divine agents appear in the narratives religious women tell about the causes of their religious experience. Hobart, like Amy Hollywood in her study of medieval religious women and Phyllis Mack in her work on 18th-century Quaker women, notes that “despite the frequency with which reference is made to religion and the role of the gods in Bali, outsiders seem to have great difficulty in appreciating the extent to which Divinity in some aspect is treated either as an extraordinarily powerful agent or as the ultimate source of all agency.”⁴⁵⁶ In the example that Hobart gives of complex agency, the divine agent is seen as creating a situation that demanded a response. In addition, Hobart considers deference as a style of complex agency or strategy for deferring responsibility to more powerful agents, as in the deference made to the royal representative by the villagers or even the high caste priest to local authorities. In the groups I attended, the deference to divine agency appears in the narratives the women in these groups tell in innumerable ways. One of the most striking appearance is the way in which Denise defers agency to God in her job search and her worry about what will come, receiving a sense of peace in hearing God say, “Not you, I got this.”⁴⁵⁷ The women in the groups I attended locate God as an actor or

⁴⁵⁶ Amy Hollywood, “Gender, Agency and the Divine in Religious Historiography,” *Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004); Phyllis Mack, “Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism,” *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003); Mark Hobart, “The Patience of Plants,” 108.

⁴⁵⁷ Quinn Temple meeting, November 18, 2009. Other instances include Mrs. Edmond’s declaration that God intervened for her when she had an ileostomy “taken down,” Quinn Temple meeting,

voice that they heed or ignore, as intervening in situations, and as present in a variety of situations and especially creating emotional experiences.

While feminist scholarship has a tendency to evaluate the effects of women's deferral to divine agency as the effects of "discourse," I intend for the account of co-agency in my ethnographic descriptions to provoke thoughts on how feminist scholarship might represent and analyze divine agency.⁴⁵⁸ Instead of looking for the effects of discourse about God, how might it change our analyses of religious women's experience if God is a witness whose presence is felt by the women in these situations and whose presence changes the outcome of their religious practices? In this dissertation, I have largely collapsed the transcendent or divine other with the social other in my analysis of these women's reading practices. This is because I wanted to demonstrate how distrust of the social foundations of identity overlap with feminist concerns about religious women's heteronomy in relationship to the divine. Nonetheless, by mostly looking at women's engagements with social other locatable by social scientific discourse (concrete individual women, texts, group outsiders), I have left further explorations of how to engage divine agency in secular feminist and religious studies scholarship to others. Yet, at the very least, I intend to open up a space in which agency need not be analyzed only in its universally perceivable material effects or in the locating of singular causes and where divine agents might more easily appear.

In the final analysis, while opening up space for multiple actors, encompassing both instruments and patients in agency, and insisting that agency is "under-determined," Hobart's

November 18, 2009; the "candids" or conversion narratives told by the women in the Breathing Space groups; and an instance that I have not described elsewhere where Brenda in the Dames and the Divine group described a time when God told her to go to a friend's house who ended up needing help, Dames and the Divine, September 23, 2009.

⁴⁵⁸ For an example of the evaluation of the discourses of submission to God (and others) see R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

account of “complex agency” may be ill-fitting to describe engagement with others that is not aimed at producing an effect.⁴⁵⁹ In this way, the playfulness of Mysterion and the Breathing Space Thursday group’s reading of biblical narratives continues to be instructive in my analysis of Protestant women’s religious experience through reading. While one might look for the unintended effects of these women’s reading practices or even criticize reading practices on the basis of *not* producing effects, the presence of playfulness as an integral part of a religious practice suggests that scholars may miss aspects of women’s religious experience if we are only looking for agency and only looking for the effects of a practice. In engagement with others, one is not always taking on a role of agent, instrument or patient, but perhaps sometimes taking up the role of co-player in a game whose goal is simply the enjoyment of the game itself.

The Patience of Plants: Genres and the Agency of Religious Texts

In addition to describing the agency of individuals, collectivities, and superior divine agents, Hobart’s essay provides a possible approach to describing the agency of objects usually considered inanimate. In the Balinese case, these are plants, but in the case of Protestant women’s reading groups, the texts themselves under discussion in the women’s meetings are those usually considered inanimate. Hobart begins his article on agency in the Balinese context with an image from a well-known Balinese text that establishes the names and uses of important Balinese plants. In the narrative, the famous sage Mpu Kuturan meditates and one by one, trees, plants, shrubs come before him, introducing themselves and answering questions about their use. Hobart argues that this is an image of the working of complex agency, “where not even plants are passive objects or empty receptacles, but are

⁴⁵⁹ Mark Hobart, “The Patience of Plants,” 96.

mobile and articulate. Mpu Kuturan did not give them either their medicinal properties or their knowledge: they told him what they could do.”⁴⁶⁰ In this next section, I want to ask how it would change the study of religious reading if the texts that the women read together tell the readers what they can do instead of being inert receptacles for the ends of religious institutions or the women readers themselves. Within the growing emphasis on the reader rather than the text within religious studies scholarship that I describe in the introduction and the turn to ethnographic methods in order to recover what readers do with texts, the texts themselves are sometimes eclipsed as actors in these scenes of reading.

In the groups I attended for this dissertation, the genre of a text under discussion was related to the kinds of discussions generated around that text. So it would seem that genre is at least part of the way that texts tell readers what they can do. Therefore, like the way that engaging with different “others” created different modalities of co-agency, interpretive agency looks different when presented with different aesthetic forms or genres. In the Protestant women’s reading groups I attended, the formal features of the texts they read, such as whether the texts contained narratives, propositions or exhortations and whether the narratives were told in the first-person or third-person, were correlated with different kinds of discussions. For instance, first-person narratives in spiritual memoirs were more likely to elicit first-person narratives and commentary from the women in these groups. In addition, there were some differences in whether the texts under discussion were marked as the genre of scripture or some other suitably religious genre. This genre was marked topically as religious as well as marked as a religious genre by the investments of authority in a text according to religious tradition. For example, John Piper’s *God is the Gospel* and Leslie Weatherhead’s *The Will of God* were marked as religious topically by having God and God’s

⁴⁶⁰ Mark Hobart, “The Patience of Plants,” 122.

relationship to humans as their subject and were marked as evangelical and liberal, respectively, by the religious traditions of which they were a part.

These differences in genre co-construct the group discussions surrounding these texts by highlighting particular possibilities for a reader's engagement with the text over others. Nonetheless, all possibilities for engagement with the text are not foreclosed by this foregrounding. For instance, one can read a doctrinal text imagining oneself in the text, as Vicky does in the beginning of her study on Romans to try to understand the relationship between Paul and his readers.⁴⁶¹ At the same time, imagining oneself as the writer or historical audience in the book of Romans is not as productive as imagining oneself in the book of Exodus. In the book of Exodus, there are many more characters (Moses, God, Pharaoh, the Israelites, individuals like Jethro) in many more narrative situations. Through genre the texts offered possibilities for engagement and the women in these groups responded to those possibilities. In some cases, we see how the women make choices to engage some of the possibilities offered and neglect others. Exodus contains a lot of legal and exhortative content in addition to its narrative framing, but the Breathing Space Thursday group largely chose to engage imaginatively with the text rather than discuss why they should or should not feel bound to the legal codes presented in Exodus.

Differently stated, the formal features of texts by which texts are separated into genres do not causally produce the reading practices that become associated with them. Rather the formal features of texts can be described as having heuristic influence on the engagements readers have with these texts. These formal features, like the existence of multiple characters in a plot, provide guidelines for reading but as Wittgenstein demonstrates in his *Philosophical Investigations*, a rule can never completely govern its own

⁴⁶¹ Breathing Space Wednesday meeting, January 27, 2010.

application.⁴⁶² The readers are the ones who take what is given in the text and use their own sense of how these formal features match up with *forms of life* that they know (both cognitively and practically) in their reading practices. Here, again, the multiplicity of actors that shape those forms of life complicate this scene, since it is never so simple as the text's statement of how it should be interpreted and an individual's application of that rule. The forms of life in religious reading are also shaped by traditions of reading, religious institutions, and the social conventions that produced the formal features of the texts at the time that they were written.

Furthermore, the religious nature of these genres highlights the difficulty in drawing a distinction between formal features of its text, its content, and the social contexts in which the texts are received. As I mention in chapter three, Ricoeur argues that religious texts are distinguished from other poetic or fictional texts by containing more "God-reference" and by the readers' willingness to be interpreted by the text.⁴⁶³ The God-reference of religious texts could be considered a formal feature of the texts especially in texts where God is treated as a character in the narrative like Exodus or where God is the addressee of text as in the Psalms. Yet God is also the content of the narrative especially in theological or doctrinal texts, and the reader's approach to the text is shaped by the way that religious communities designate genres of texts as religious. The authority invested in scriptural genres over other religious genres is communicated through religious leaders as Vicky did in her emphasis on the book of Romans as central for evangelical Christian identity. All of these factors, including the individual's own experience of the divine, however that might be mediated, contribute to the

⁴⁶² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations, Third Edition*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), §81-86 (p. 31^e-35^e).

⁴⁶³ Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 43.

reader's "willingness to be interpreted by the text" and the designation of a particular genre as religious.

The concept of genre, then, creates containers for all of these distinguishing features of texts and opens up possibilities for the analysis of the influence of religious texts in women's religious experience. An ethnographer of reading's attentiveness to genre brings into view features of texts that color religious experience that might otherwise have remained invisible. The discussion of genre in biblical studies (ie in the academic study of the biblical texts themselves) has had a long history, and many have argued that different genres of biblical text should be read differently. However, there have not been any studies that reveal how different biblical genres *are* read differently. The anthropological discussion of the use of Christian scriptures has largely treated this anthology of texts as a unitary entity, while recognizing that the ideologies that surround the Bible are multiple and differ by social context.

Furthermore, genre is not only used to distinguish authoritative texts from less authoritative texts, but to mark the cultural status of a text. Most of the non-biblical religious genres are marked as low or middle-brow cultural productions and along with other "genre fiction," like mysteries, thrillers, romance novels, and much of speculative fiction (a term encompassing many science fiction and fantasy genres), are not often treated as cultural productions whose aesthetic features are worth commentary. As further research on genres like the spiritual memoirs I mention in chapter one may uncover differences in the reception of this genre and the reception of apocalyptic fiction studied by Amy Johnson Frykholm or the evangelical romances studied by Lynn Neal based on the formal features of the texts.

In the end, this dissertation aims to provoke more questions than answers about the relationship between genres of religious texts and women's religious experiences or agencies. There are many lines of inquiry that my fieldwork experiences did not or were not designed to investigate. One such idiosyncrasy of the data I collected among these five Protestant women's reading groups is that more devotional genres of texts, like the Psalms, were not widely read. The Quinn Temple group did follow a Bible study based on the Psalms while I was attending the group, but since there was not a stable group of individuals who attended the group during this time, I have largely left these meetings out of my analysis. The devotional genre of text may be one in which the form of the second-person as in texts written to God or in which the cultivation of the individual affective dimension of an experience of God is more conducive among some U.S. Protestants to individual reading practices than collective ones.⁴⁶⁴ However, my data are not sufficient to investigate that hunch. Moreover, there may be other genres of popular religious literature that just did not happen to appear at all during the time I spent with these groups of women.

I have a suspicion that the practice of imagining oneself as a character in the biblical narrative has its counterpart in religious literature genres. I encountered a popular theological book, *When Life and Beliefs Collide* by Carolyn Custis James, as the selection of another Breathing Space group that was not part of my study. The book contained episodes in which the author imagines the perspective of Mary of Bethany, a biblical character who

⁴⁶⁴ As I discuss in chapter one, religious, cultural, and class-based understandings of privacy and the degrees to which a particular group feels "intimate" shape what can and cannot be shared in reading groups. See again Jody Shapiro Davie, *Women in the presence: constructing community and seeking spirituality in mainline Protestantism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), for a discussion of privacy in a mainline Protestant spirituality group.

appears as a friend of Jesus in the gospel texts.⁴⁶⁵ These episodes were only a portion of James' text, which also included episodes from the author's own life and exhortations for women to be more involved in theological thinking. Nonetheless, these episodes in James' book reminded me of other fictional retellings of biblical narratives from the perspectives of women in particular and offer perhaps further evidence of the connection between biblical narratives and practice of imagining oneself in the text.⁴⁶⁶

Finally, the interconnections between religious genres and secular genres of texts invite many avenues of research that I have not pursued, particularly since this dissertation does not compare religious reading groups to non-religious ones. My analysis of reading biblical narrative argues that the term identification that has been used in studies of secular reading groups and readers of evangelical romance is not adequate to describe the practice of imagining oneself in the text that I observed.⁴⁶⁷ The comparison between readers in my research context and these other contexts is suggestive in that imagining oneself as a character in a text may be practiced in similar ways among readers of non-religious fiction. Yet, further research would be necessary to support this conclusion and to investigate whether this practice is a feature of engagements with narrative texts more generally. These questions wade into deeper waters where the issues of how larger cultural and social forces might shape practices of reading in the wider currents of American culture.

⁴⁶⁵ Carolyn Custis James, *When Life and Beliefs Collide: How Knowing God Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

⁴⁶⁶ The examples I was thinking of were Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador USA, 1997) or Madeleine L'Engle's *Many Waters* (New York: Square Fish, 1986), though these books construct new narratives inspired by the biblical narratives rather than closely adhering to the biblical narratives themselves.

⁴⁶⁷ I engage Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) in particular on this point in Chapter 3.

Genres of Religious Agency Beyond the Text

While obviously my conclusions about how the formal features in the genres of religious texts shape reading practices are limited to the groups of Protestant women in this ethnography, scholarly attention to the influences of the formal features of aesthetic productions might also find purchase in other religious traditions. Of course, different religious traditions carry with them different aesthetic productions and different engagements with the multiple others that are present in these aesthetic productions. American Protestantisms have foregrounded their relationship with textuality and with the Biblical texts in particular. Religious studies scholarship has pushed against this description of Protestantism as monolithically textual even as it has recognized the way that certain kinds of Protestant emphases on textuality have shaped the apparatus of Western encounters with non-Protestant religious traditions.⁴⁶⁸

This dissertation certainly continues in that vein of scholarship that seeks to nuance definitions of Protestantism in ways that sometimes cut across the self-definitions of Protestant elites. I did this by looking at the act of reading as practiced in particular group settings as opposed to analyzing the texts themselves alone. In essence, I attempted to acknowledge that Protestant reading is practice among other practices, including many bodily and non-verbal practices, though these do not play a central role in my analysis. The women

⁴⁶⁸ Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, Mark R. Valerie eds. *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). The discussions of how the category of religion has been shaped by Christian and European frameworks abound. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) for a recent and astute analysis, including a section on “The Aristocracy of Book Religions” in Max Muller’s thought, 210-221. Also see Vasudha Narayanan, “Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, vol. 4, 2000, 761-779, for a description of the privileging of certain kinds of brahmanic materials in the study of Hinduism over “anthropological” concerns like food.

in these groups are present to other and communicate through their body language, sometimes indicating their disagreement through their posture as Kelly did when she found the other Mysterion women's answers too simplistic for the problem of whether or not non-Christians would be saved.⁴⁶⁹ In addition, as I discuss in chapter three, in many of the groups, laughter is an ever-present non-verbal, bodily, and social response to the texts under discussion. Nonetheless, from a more global perspective, reading is just one of the practices in which Protestants engage, along with singing, preaching, praying, eating, and myriad others.

As a result, it may seem to contradictory to then suggest that what I learned during an ethnography on reading and what people did with texts might be applicable to non-Protestant, non-Christian, or non-textual aesthetic engagements. Yet, as I discussed in the introduction, the struggle to describe and analyze the agency of religious women is not limited to studies of American Protestantisms. As Robert Orsi argues in *Thank You, St. Jude*, Catholic women's engagement with St. Jude is refracted through engagements with multiple others and the practice of praying to St. Jude contains different significances for different institutional, cultural and social relationships.

“Because figures like Jude are both outside in the culture (in the control of the Shrine clergy, in the wider domain of devotionism) and inside the hearts and imaginations of the people who need them and live their lives with them,...it is best to think of figures like Jude as supple, multidimensional idioms for working on the self and the world in an oscillating dialectic between “fantasy” and “reality,” self and other, objective and subjective, past and present, submission and resistance.”⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Mysterion meeting, May 4, 2010. In this instance, Kelly's increasingly hunched and disengaged posture encouraged Sara to ask Kelly a direct question about whether or not the discussion had answered her question.

⁴⁷⁰ Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 210.

While Orsi describes many of the physical features of the devotees' prayer practices to St. Jude, I wonder whether there were differences that could be traced in women's engagements with prayer cards versus figurines or medallions or other practices around prayer to St. Jude. In our interest in what religious women do as part of their religious practices, it is tempting to neglect the objects with which these practices are done. These objects can exert influences in their presence in the religious sphere and become places for intersection between self and multiple others.⁴⁷¹

Furthermore, focus on women's engagement with aesthetic productions opens a door to move beyond the concerns with how women's agency may be affected by their engagement with the "other" in religious practice. The modalities of agency I describe in this dissertation are all enacted through and with the other and the distinguishing characteristics of these modalities are not categorized by whether or not they contribute to changing the structural realities of women's lives. In essence, I disengage with the assumption that these women's involvement with divine and social others intrinsically limits their own range of influence as agents, which would therefore limit their ability to engage in societal change. Within the zero-sum understanding of agency, however, one cannot be a cause if one is the effect of some other cause, whether that cause is a person, an object, or a tradition. At the very least, within this understanding of agency one must locate the precise effects of the involvement with the other on the self because these effects are necessarily limitations on the individual and the space that is left is the space within which individual agency is presumed to operate. Yet in kinds of reading I have described the effects of the other, whether it be an individual, text, or doctrinal perspective, may be co-determined or not helpfully described as

⁴⁷¹ See Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

effects at all but as creating imaginative spaces. As a result, definitions of agency that allow for multiple actors, co-constructing and shaping the self and society, and that are more capacious than a binary of on or off, passive or active, autonomous or heteronomous must be drafted in order to describe religious subjectivity and its acts.

I hope that the scenes of reading I have describe provide the beginnings of a grammar of agency or perhaps more appropriately an aesthetics of agency by which we might appreciate the stylistic features of women's religious engagement in interaction with social structural criticisms, rather than simply one or the other. The choice of combining ethnographic and theoretical analyses in one dissertation has limited my ability perhaps to do justice to either theoretical or ethnographic completeness. I have attempted to err on the side of ethnography and therefore have not provided here a new constructive theory of agency nor engaged all of the theoretical discussions of the "other" or theories of action that might be useful or relevant to the task of constructing a theory of agency. I have preferred to pose the particularities of an ethnographic situation as a measuring stick for theoretical judgment and a concrete example through which I might pose questions for feminist thought on subjectivity and agency.

Therefore, I offer in this dissertation a description of five Protestant women's reading groups and how they practiced multiple modalities of co-agency and styles of engagement with others in and through their practices of reading. Even in this case, I cannot pretend to have exhausted the analysis of all of the factors in the field of play with which these women engaged and the implications of their engagements. In my close reading of the Mysterion meeting in mid-January in which Christina, Diane, Emily, and Sarah gathered to discuss the book of Mark, I discovered that they resonated with each other's stories, wallowed in and

struggled with the text, and imagined themselves in Jesus's shoes. This meeting and all of the discussions I was a part of, including Mysterion's later discussions about the boundaries between themselves and religious others and the meetings of the Dames and the Divine, Quinn Temple, and Breathing Space groups, contributed to and inflected my ruminations about feminist scholarship on religious women and their experiences. While ultimately I must claim all responsibility for the descriptions and conclusions that I have written here, these women co-constructed the ethnographic experiences at the basis of this dissertation through their engagement with me. I endeavor to be as open to their influences as I can, but I will never be able to precisely locate the various effects of their influences on me and my scholarship.

Appendix I:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your faith journey and how you got to where you are today in your spiritual/Christian life.
2. What has been the role of reading in your spiritual/Christian life? Reading alone, in groups, the Bible or other books?
3. Are there other practices or activities (besides attending this group) that are important to you in your spiritual/Christian life? How important is prayer to you?
4. (Added in some interviews) What does being a Christian mean to you?
5. Besides your current group, have you been involved with other Christian groups in the past, either like your current group or different?
6. How did you get involved in this group and how long have you been coming?
7. What does the group mean to you? What do you value most about it?
8. Is there anything you wish were different about the group?
9. Are there particular books that the group has read that were particularly meaningful for you? Are there any books that the group read that you hated? What do you think of the book the group is currently reading?
10. How important is it to you that the group only includes women?
11. Is there anything else about the group that you think I should know?
12. Do you have any questions for me?

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