

RELIGIOSITY AND FEMINISM: NAVIGATING GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS AND
IDEOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

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Religious women and feminist women are large demographics around the world, but relatively little is known about women who identify as both religious and feminist. In this thesis I ask: How do religious women hold feminist ideals when religion is seen by many feminists as an inherently patriarchal and oppressive institution? How does the interplay of their feminism and religiosity affect their life decisions and how they worship? How does having a religious feminist identity affect interactions with people in their lives? To address these issues I interviewed eleven (11) religious feminist women from a small rural community in Northern California. The women identified as Christian, Jewish and Muslim. I used structural symbolic interactionism, intersectionality, identity theory, and standpoint theory to analyze the data. My sample size was split between interviewing 6 Christian women, 1 Jewish woman, and 4 Muslim women. I anticipated interviewing more Christian women overall because of the access I had to the population and small size of the community. The age demographics of the interviews was relatively homogenous based on each religion, with Christian women being all over 35, the Jewish

woman over 60, and the Muslim women all in their 20's. Regardless of age differences, I found that the religious feminist women I interviewed were able to seamlessly and effortlessly integrate religion and feminism into their lives, and had done so for the majority of their lives. While there were minor instances of disagreements with their religious texts, they found processes of interpreting their texts in ways that were in line with their feminist beliefs. When asked about tense interactions within their lives, the women all shared stories of interactions with people in close social circles such as family members, religious peers and co-workers. They used micro-level agency to gauge their reactions to these tense moments, by trusting in their religious beliefs to “do the right thing”, while also utilizing the strength of their feminist beliefs to not stand down. While my intent was to focus on the difficulties of sharing 2 seemingly contradictory identities such as being religious and feminist, the interviews proved that religious feminist women feel more empowered by their religious beliefs than oppressed by them. Based on this, I call for more studies of religious feminist women to be conducted, and I call for more studies to use intersectionality as a tool for analyzing empowerment and liberation instead of oppression and domination.

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INTRODUCTION

People don't often hear the terms "religion" and "feminism" in the same sentence unless someone is speaking of opposites. From a secular feminist standpoint, the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) have patriarchal and misogynistic scriptures and practices. According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "history shows that the moral degradation of woman is due more to theological superstitions than to all other influences" (1885, 389). With religion having such well documented negative impacts on women (Christ. 2016, Chong 2014, Daly, 1973, Mikołajczak and Pietrzak. 2014, Nishat 2017, Radford Ruether 1982 and 1993, McDonough. 1977) how can some women claim to be both religious and feminist? How are they able to navigate through the scripture they put so much faith into, while simultaneously holding on to their feminist beliefs? With the prominent prophets of the Abrahamic religions being mostly men, how do women find ways of connecting with the prophets? What kind of relationships do women have with "God", "Yahweh" or "Allah"? Do they feel their gender makes a difference in their relationship to their holy figures, when their scriptures always refer to them in male terms? These relationships are key to my study, since the experiences women have within these interactions are ultimately going to shape their identities and the choices they make. It's possible that these women have specific interpretations of feminist ideologies that more easily align with their religious beliefs while simultaneously denying other feminist perspectives. Or they may interpret seemingly patriarchal scriptures on their own, in more

women-friendly ways. For this study I interview Christian, Muslim, and Jewish women because of the reputations the religions have for being patriarchal, and also because they are the most popular religions in the US.

I decided to pursue this topic because there is a lack of studies pertaining to religious-feminist women and their relationship with their scripture and beliefs. I also chose to study religious feminist after meeting a good friend in college who faced difficulties with her religious beliefs after learning about feminism. If she was struggling to integrate religion and feminism into her life, how common was this for other women?

There is little research done on how religious women integrate feminism into their lives and use their religious/feminist beliefs to make major life choices. Most studies on the intersections of religion and feminism I have seen have been focused on Islamic feminism after 9/11, explaining that Islam is an egalitarian religion, even though media reports in the US, at the time, stated otherwise (Abu-Laghdod 2002, Badran 2005, Gender and Society 2015, Massoumi 2015, Sadiqi 2006, Salem 2013, Vanzan 2012). While I tried to find literature on intersectionality within religion, it proved difficult to find. Instead I found studies that analyzed women's agency within religion. I decided to use this literature on religious women's agency because the examples found were cases of women using agency to aid them in their everyday lives in accordance to their religion. They faced tension in their lives because of their religion, and that is what I chose to explore with my study as well. Whether the work documents women's agency as expressed through social movements or community work, (Avishai 2008, Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark 1997, Massoumi 2015, Reiter 2006, Rinaldo 2008 & 2014, van de

Brandt 2015, Zion-Waldoks 2015) or documents religious women's place within their communities (Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark 1997, Irshai 2008, Massoumi 2015, Reiter 2016, Rinaldo 2008 and 2014, Yanay-Ventura 2016, Zion-Waldoks 2015), not many studies focus on the everyday lives and experiences of these women. This is interesting given that the Pew Research Center's research (2016), demonstrates that, globally, women are more devout than men by multiple standard measures of religiosity. While more women proclaim they are religious, men in Islamic and Jewish communities attend services more often, which leads people outside of the communities to believe they are male-dominated religions (Prickett 2015). Ipsos Global Advisor (2015) statistics shows that a little over half of women in industrialized countries consider themselves a feminist, while the majority of the people in most countries polled believed in, and supported, women's equality. With so many countries, and women, pro-equality and religious, there are bound to be women who are both. So where are the studies about these religious women and the challenges they may face in their everyday lives?

One person who provides a glimpse into religious women's everyday lives is Nancy Ammerman, who engages in research on "lived religion" to focus on the everyday practices of ordinary people, rather than official religious texts, organizations, and experts. Such research includes "attention to rituals and stories and spiritual experiences that may draw on official religious traditions, but may also extend beyond them" (2015; 1). I find this concept of "lived religion" intriguing, and use this framework throughout this study, since I am specifically studying religious women and how they integrate religion into the choices they make and interactions they have.

To theoretically locate my research, in Chapter One I explore the theoretical frameworks that focus on social interactions and institutions. Standpoint theory and Intersectionality cover how individuals react to the systems around them and how these systems have an effect on individuals. Chapter Two covers Symbolic Interactionism and Identity theory, both of which are more focused on how individuals react to other individuals. These theories all align with studying religious feminist women as I interview them about interactions between themselves and people in their religious lives. I ask about their relationships with their own religious beliefs, scriptures and practices (and the institution of religion in general). I also asked them how they use their personalized feminism and fused it with their religion, and how that fusion has helped them make major life choices such as careers, romantic relationships, family and friendships. In the next chapter I cover methodology, which includes semi-structured interviews with 11 religious women from a small rural community in Northern California. In Chapter Four I turn to my findings. My findings cover a few main themes, including how culture affects the religion of the women, or vice versa. Other themes include understanding “God”, re-interpretations of religious texts, how religion affects life choices, and tensions interactions women faced when religion and feminism collided at different points in their lives. I end the thesis with my conclusions and suggestions for future research.

CH 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Feminist Standpoint Theory

When asking religious feminist women about their everyday lives, I am looking into their specific standpoint. The dictionary definition of a standpoint is “the mental position, attitude, etc., from which a person views and judges things” (Dictionary.com). Sandra Harding (1991) first wrote of feminist standpoint theory by exploring relations between men and women, which she called “feminist standpoint theory.” Feminist standpoint theory has three main claims: “1. Knowledge is socially situated. 2. Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions, whereas non-marginalized groups are not socially situated in the same way. 3. Research, particularly which focuses on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized” (IEP). Feminist standpoint theory analyzes how women socially construct their worlds, and how the knowledge a woman gains from her own perspective is significantly different from men’s’ perspectives. Women have a different type of knowledge; their lifelong subordination to men allows women to see the world in a different way, and that knowledge can be used to challenge the male-dominated conventional wisdom. Sandra Harding states that “the authority for the feminist standpoint lies not in women’s authentic renditions of their everyday lives, but in the observations and theory about the rest of nature and social relations;

observations and theory that start from and look at the world from the perspective of women's lives" (1991: 124). This is exactly why I am studying religious feminist women, and their everyday lives. As a religious woman and also a feminist, the religious feminist sees the world and her religion in a specific way, and I explore how she connects her feminist self to her religion and vice versa. These women live specific lives and have very specific experiences and struggles that I believe aren't often discussed or studied.

Different theorists have written about how standpoints should be understood. Others focus on how a standpoint is earned and built through experiences of struggle. Sandra Harding stated that "only through such struggles can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained. This need for struggle emphasizes the fact that a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement. A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by "opening one's eyes" (Harding 1991: 127). Using this idea, I argue that women aren't born as religious feminist women rather they occupy a social location and identity that is built and created, that is, it is achieved.

There are multiple standpoints I analyze in my study. The standpoint of a mother, a daughter, an LGBT+ woman, a Muslim woman, a teacher, a religious leader etc. All of these different standpoints have varying perspectives and experiences, even within the same faith. An important question is: How do standpoints differ based on faith, if at

all? Contemporary standpoint feminism recognizes that there is no universal women's experience, that racism, homophobia, and classism should also be taken into account and studied when analyzing women's standpoints. This brings me to the next theory I will be utilizing for my study: intersectionality.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991 when she was examining violence towards women within African American communities. She explained the difficulties black women had when discussing racism and sexism together because predominately white feminist groups, and male dominated black power groups, failed to recognize that black women experience both racism and sexism at the same time (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality theory calls researchers to observe the different areas of identity that everyone has and how people can experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. "Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood and shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways" (Collins 2016: 2). This diversity of factors is found among the women whom I interviewed since I had no demographic restrictions, beyond interviewing women over the age of 18 who (met broad criteria of being religious and defining as a feminist?). But

everything else, their race, sexuality, origin of birth and family, ability, and socioeconomic status was welcomed. All of these different statuses have an impact on each woman and these factors will have shaped each woman's experiences. According to Collins,

When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race, gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (2016: 2).

I use an intersectional lens to analyze how participants are treated by others within, and outside of, their religious groups; this has been an important part of my exploration. In exploring intersectionality, the personal narratives of women are crucial; they demonstrate the complexity of women's multiple identities and how these identities allow for oppression and discrimination. Power is a major focus of intersectionality studies, and religion holds a significant amount of power in society.

To understand both standpoint theory and intersectionality, we must understand domains of power. According to Collins (2016:6) there are 4 different domains of power: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural and structural. Interpersonal power, the first form of power, refers to who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged within social interactions, it is revealed in relations people have with one another. Whether the interaction is between a wife and husband, a worker and a business owner, a teacher or a student there is almost always some type of hierarchy within the relationship. In my study, there are multiple

relationships I explore. I look at relationships between the spouses (if applicable), the pastor or other church leader and the believer, and a daughter/mother/sister and her family members. Religious sacred texts also reveal power relationships between men and women, Gods/deities and humans, the natural and the supernatural. With the prominent prophets of the Abrahamic religions being mostly men, how do women find ways of connecting with them? What kind of relationships do women have with “God”, “Yahweh” or “Allah”? Do they feel their gender makes a difference in their relationship to their holy figures, when their scriptures always refer to them in male terms? These relationships are key to my study, since the experiences women have within these interactions are ultimately going to shape their identities and the choices they make.

Intersectional theory also asks us to consider the second “disciplinary” domain of power, which refers to the treatment people receive, whether it’s from someone who holds a form of authority, or their peers. How are religious women treated if they make decisions that may not follow what is expected of them and their religious beliefs? Will they face being exiled or otherwise treated poorly within their group? How do women decide on major life decisions if people within their religious communities do not agree with them?

The third domain of power – the cultural domain “helps manufacture messages that playing fields are level, that all competitions are fair, and that any resulting patterns of winners and losers have been fairly accomplished” (Collin 2016: 11). The dominant religion within the US is Christianity. With all major recognized holidays being

Christian, and with messages of Christianity seen in many aspects of US society, such as our government, schools, prayers, and songs, it's clear that other religions are not recognized. While the US is seen as a "melting pot: of religions, races, genders, national backgrounds etc. the overall narrative of faith is predominantly focused on one group.

Also within every religion, scriptures or sacred texts are read by practitioners so that they may understand and interpret the words of their Holy beings. Religious texts are part of the cultural domain of power, in that they aren't kept solely in the "religious" world. For instance, some countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, integrate religious texts into the culture in stricter ways than others. Religious texts have been created by men and since women have been excluded (Smith 1987: 18) from producing this kind of knowledge and power, their experiences, interests, and voices are not represented as much as men's. Within these texts are misogynistic and patriarchal views towards women; according to Matilda Joslyn Gage (1839), the tradition of women being inferior started with the Christian Bible. "[Gage] saw clearly that many of the features of public life that women found oppressive—the laws regarding inheritance, marriage, or birth control, for example—stemmed from Christian beliefs. Recognizing that these beliefs had evolved through the centuries, she argued that in many cases their evolution had been manipulated by men for their benefit as opposed to that of women" (Harrison 2007: 147). Misogynistic scripture can be found within the Jewish and Islamic texts as well. In Exodus 19.15, Moses warns his people "Be ready for the third day [of the flood]; do not go near a woman" (Weber 2007: 152). The context for this verse is Moses

addressing Jewish people as a whole community, “at the very moment when Israel stands trembling waiting for God’s presence to descend upon the mountain, Moses addressed the community only as men.... At the central moment of Jewish history, women are invisible” (Weber 2007: 152). In Jewish religious civilization, “as a result of role-assignment for men and women, the realm of Torah study within traditional Judaism has throughout history remained the near-exclusive province of men” (Elleson and Ben-Naim, 2001).

The final domain of power is structural, which refers to the organization and structural set up of institutions. In this case, Christianity, Islam and Judaism have been male-dominated from the beginning, with male-centered perspectives within the writings and teachings. The writing of the scriptures was at a time when only wealthy men were taught to read and write, women were already subordinate. Even with re-writings of Christian scriptures over multiple centuries, the male-dominated view has stayed in place. In the Christian Bible, verses state that women must be subservient to their husband within their marriage (1 Timothy 2:11-12). In the traditional Torah, women cannot study the word of God. I ask the women how they feel about and deal with structural power differences within the institutions of which they are a part? What is their stance within their family, religious groups or peer groups? Do they openly challenge these power differences between men and women?

Based on the intersectional literature I found, the authors state that while religion is a notable part of people’s identities, it isn’t usually included in explorations or analyses

using intersectionality. The author's state that by using intersectionality as a form of analysis, it's claiming that religion is oppressive to women the same way race, gender, or class can be (Singh 2015, Valkonen 2016, Weber 2015, Zion-Waldoks 2015). In reality, women don't feel the same disadvantages in their society that stem from their religious identities, in the same way they feel it based on their race, class or gender. However, there are situations when specific aspects of one's religion (such as religious practices) can be oppressive to women, and there is a substantial collection of such literature and I will go over it in the next chapter.

Intersectional Studies that Include Religion

Some intersectional studies list religion as one aspect of difference, it is rarely fully explored in its own right. Beverly Weber (2015) says

In order to consider the roles of religion and faith in intersectional frameworks, then, it is first key to acknowledge, following Umut Erel, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Jin Haritaworn, and Christian Klesse, that intersectionality only has analytical value if it is part of an anti-racist and postcolonial socio-critical framework that accounts for the ways in which racist histories structure knowledge. (Erel et al., 2007: 245)

Within each of these religions, racial history and the production of racist knowledge can be analyzed. For instance we can explore the history of Christianity as being racially biased, with race and culture wars between Christians and Muslims as old as the 1500's (Darian-Smith 2010). Or within Islam, which is usually considered an "anti-racist" religion, still had slaves from Africa, Central and Eastern Asia (BBC 2009).

Race and ethnicity within Judaism can be explored as well, with many people arguing about whether being “Jewish” means one occupies a racial category or not and with studies exploring experiences Jews have faced with anti-Semitic treatment and prejudices (Beanman-Kogan 2013, Greenbaum 1999). Others have pointed to the discrimination that Sephardic Jews have experienced within Israel (Aljazeera 2016). Within each religion is a part of history where race is a major factor, and intersectionality can be used to analyze it. At the same time there was a lack of intersectional religious literature, there were other gaps within the literature as well, such as literature exploring religious feminist women.

An explanation of the lack of scholarly research on religious feminist women in general is because feminism originated from secular thinking. Feminist views of religion are usually negative, “with [feminist] studies usually claiming that women who participate in patriarchal religious traditions are acting against their own objective interests, and are therefore simply the passive and brainwashed victims, dupes, or doormats of men and their patriarchal institutions” (Avishai 2008; Burke 2012). With this study, I hope to challenge this notion. There seems to be a blind spot about religious feminist women that few studies have tried to fill; there are a few studies that focus on religious women’s autonomy using feminist ideologies within their communities or intersectionality studies about feminism that exclude religion within the analysis, but never both. Even with these limitations, I still plan to use intersectionality, as it’s important for me to analyze the many intersections and identities women have other than

their religious or feminist identities. When dealing with intersectionality and religion, I appreciate Singh's viewpoint, as it focuses on looking at oppressive forces with an intersectional lens, but also looking at liberation as well.

Intersectionality must at least have room for diverse notions and practices of both oppression and liberation, and that in order to do so it must not treat as sufficient a negative consensus on anti-oppression. This is simply to reiterate Spelman's point about intersectionality from many years ago: "No one ought to expect the forms of our liberation to be any less various than the forms of our oppression. We need to be at least as generous in imagining what women's liberation will be like as our oppressors have been in devising what women's oppression has been" (Spelman 1988, 132). (Singh 2015: 670)

I liked this quote because it's showing us that we can use intersectionality to not only explore the different ways people experience oppression, but also that what is seen as oppressive to some can be liberating for others. Religious women are proud of their religion, and they will express that in many ways. Another example is how the LGBT+ community and people of color have "taken back" their identities and are expressing them in ways that empower them. Being proud to be Chicana, Filipino or Afro-Cuban, openly expressing one's culture and not trying to assimilate is the same as being openly proud of one's religion and practicing it in an unapologetic way.

Symbolic Interactionism

Another theoretical perspective that provides insight into exploring the lives of religious feminist women is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism was a term first coined by Herbert Blumer (1986). Traditional symbolic interactionism (SI) states

that symbolic meaning is created by individuals during social interactions. Society is constructed by the subjective meanings that individuals place on objects, events and behaviors. Society is socially constructed and constantly modified through individual interpretations, not on what is objectively “true” (Carter & Fuller 2015). Social bonds are then formed through these interactions.

Structural symbolic interactionism is a little different than traditional SI. Within traditional SI, society is said to be in a constant state of flux, it’s constantly being recreated through individual’s interpretations. But with structural SI, society is fixed and stable. Society existed before the individual and will exist after the individual. In structural SI, society’s social institutions interacts with people, which shapes individual’s interactions with others (Stryker 2008). We are born into society as it is and we learn about its organization through socialization. Socialization is the lifelong process where an individual learns their personal identity, the norms, values, behaviors, and social skills that are appropriate to their social position. As we become socialized, we define who we are within society. We learn early on what our assigned gender is, and we usually conform to it. We learn the characteristics of masculinity and femininity through our interactions. The socialization process happens through specific actors, or agents of socialization such as parents, siblings, friends, teachers, the media, and religious services. So we can say that many religious feminist women were socialized into their identity as religious women through their families. Many of them learned of feminism through

school, and through that experience their identity, behaviors and beliefs changed. On the other hand some women may have grown up in egalitarian families, where feminism didn't need to be explained, equality was already there.

I believe both structural SI and traditional SI can be applied to my thesis because while religion is a socially constructed institution, it's an institution that any people react to and relate to. Religion is a major institution for any people around the world, and we are all aware of it and react to it in different ways. While religion is a massive institution and therefore it is worth studying its function within society, it's also important that we understand how people individually react to it as well. We have seen some changes in religion lately, such as women being able to study the Talmud and become Rabbi's or Pastors. Women have slowly gained more respect within the institution of religion, but in religious scriptures women are still portrayed the same as they were before.

Religious rituals and beliefs are socially constructed based on historical contexts. Rituals, scriptures and other religious practices are all symbolic activities that help define the identities of individuals and groups of people. Women within the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) all have symbolic meaning and specific roles attached to them, and these roles are then interpreted by the believers. In all three religions, verses were written stating the inferiority of women to men. There are verses of specific jobs women must do or how she is to be treated. In Judaism, and then in Christianity, a woman committed the "original sin" by offering Adam the forbidden fruit.

She is then cursed for eternity by enduring pain during childbirth and subservience to men. Jewish men also recite a daily prayer in which he says “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman.” In Christianity, several verses speak of the subordination of women as divinely ordered, that women should be seen and not heard, nor have authority over men (Timothy 2.11-12) and that they must be quiet in church and learn everything from their husband (I Corinthians 14:34-35). The Qur’an at 4:34 states “Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property. So good women are obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom you fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them “ (Answering Muslims).

But there are also verses in each holy text that talks about women in positive ways, or include empowering stories of women. The Torah tells the story of Sarah, the wife of the prophet Abraham, who was written as having as much influence over the teachings of God as her husband. In Genesis 21:12, the Torah states “Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice.” In the Qur’an, there is a verse that states that men and women are seen equally in the eyes of Allah and that they can each attain the same level of spirituality.

Surely, men who submit themselves to GOD and women who submit themselves to HIM, and believing men and believing women, and obedient men and obedient women, and truthful men and truthful women, and men steadfast in their faith and steadfast women, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity and

men who remember ALLAH much and women who remember HIM – ALLAH has prepared for all of them forgiveness and a great reward” (33:36).

This verse in the Qur’an acknowledges both men and women, and states that as long as men and women are good people and faithful believers, then Allah see them as equally spiritual and equally praised. While these scriptures display positive and negative views on women, they can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on who is doing the interpretation. Additionally, religious texts were written during a time when women didn’t have access to education in the same way men did, so the original texts represent the time periods in which they were written and re-written. Interestingly, as I researched more into each religion, I found many sources stating that each of these religions view women as equals. Why the contradiction? It could be because of the varying ideas amongst authors of different articles, whether internet sites were created by those who were religious, or not religious, or feminists. Seeing this difference in the use of religious texts shows symbolic interactionism in the works, everyone is writing a different interpretation of the text, and those interpretations depend on the individual. A consideration of symbolic interaction leads me to ask how religious women, in particular, are interpreting these texts? How have these texts and the women’s experiences shaped their identity and their own personal beliefs? How has their individual race, class, age and ability affected their religious beliefs and the interactions they have with others?

I use SI to ask questions such as “what kind of meaning does the religious feminist woman construct with those around her? How does she interact with the people

who attend the same religious services as her? What are her interactions with her family like?” Meaning making and interpretation are important within my study as well, which goes along with symbolic interactionism. How do women interpret texts that can be seen as misogynistic? How often are these texts read and how much of an impact do these texts have on a woman’s behavior and thought process? Have these women found ways on interpreting these texts that caters to their feminist beliefs? And if so, how have they implemented these new interpretations into their lives?

Identity Theory

The final theory I utilize within my study is identity theory. Identity theory was first written by social psychologists Jan Stets and Peter Burke (Stets & Burke 2000).

Identity theory explains the specific meanings that individuals have for their multiple identities that they claim; how these identities relate to one another for any one person; how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts, and feelings or emotions; and how their identities tie them into society at large. (Burke 2009: 3)

Identity formation is a constant process, every experience we have shapes our identity in some way. Society itself shapes our identity as well, with each institution shaping who we are in a particular manner. Our sense of “self” is comprised of many different roles within the social structure such as student, worker, mother, father, spouse etc. A role is a set of expectations tied to social positions that guide an individual’s behavior and attitude. Some roles religious women may carry are the roles of a mother

and wife within religious culture. With these roles, women are expected (as taught to them by their religion) to serve their husband. They are the bearer of children and expected to care for them as well as the home. Roles also come with role identities, which are “the internalized meanings of a role that individuals apply to themselves” (Burke 2009: 114). An example is the role of a mother. She is expected to support her husband and raise her children. The role identity a mother may take on is nurturing, affectionate and kind. While some mothers fit this role identity, some mothers may be more aloof, more protective than nurturing and may have a sharp tongue. But that doesn’t make her a bad mother, she simply expresses her role differently based on her own understanding of motherhood. Roles come into play with religiosity as well. Religious norm adherence is defined as “the degree to which an individual adheres to the normative expectations of his or her religious group” (Wimberley 1989: 130). The norms will vary between the Abrahamic religions, but I’m curious as to how many women adhere to the norms that are expected of them, and how many don’t adhere to them. For instance, when it comes to marriage, some women may marry a partner with different religious beliefs. Some women may choose to have children without being married. Additionally, some women only perform a few of the expected roles within their religion.

While each individual has roles to carry out, these roles are given to us based on the social institutions to which we belong. An institution, according to Parsons, “should be considered a higher unit of order of social structure than the role, and indeed it is made up of a plurality of interdependent role-patterns” (1951: 39). The main institutions I plan

to look at will be religion, the family, health care and economic institutions (careers). Within the family, some aspects I explore are marriage and relationships between family members. I ask about the participants opinions on abortion and contraceptives. I also ask of their experiences learning about menstruation and if their religion played a role in their attitudes towards menstruation now. I also look at the identity women chose to have as they attend services, whether they are attendees of the service or if they are working the service as a speaker. I also explore how involved they are with their place of worship and their religious communities, how often they participate in religious functions, and what interactions are like with their religious peers. I also ask if they openly share their feminist views or not. These questions all speak to the participant's identities and how they merge their feminist and religious identities, and as is clear from the above, our identities are not only personal, but are social identities as well. Social identities arise from the groups to which an individual feels they belong; in some cases these social identities are not chosen, but ascribed from the outside. Within this study, the social identities I explore are Christian, Jewish and Muslim women who are all feminists. Other examples of social identities could be Democrats or Latinas. In this study I am most interested in exploring social identities. Not only are the women religious and feminist, but they may be students, or volunteers, or Republicans. With the many different identities women can carry at once, their religious and feminist identities may be the largest and have the most influence on their behavior. But how do these other identities

mesh with the religious and the feminist? I explored the intersection of these different types of identities in this project.

CH 2. INTEGRATION OF RELIGION AND FEMINISM

While literature on religious women was easy to find (Abu-Lughod 2002, Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, and Leathers 2008, Zobair, 2015 et all) , as well as literature on feminist women, (Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, and Leathers, 2008, Arora and Elwar 2015, et all), the integration of examining the lives of religious feminist women proved to be more difficult than I expected. Some common themes in the literature I did find were the binary of secular and religious feminist discourse (Abu-Lughod 2002, Ali 2008. Arora and Elawar 2015, Braude 2004, Magee 1995, Avashai 2015, Osman 2011, Radford Ruether1982, van den Brandt 2015), Islamic feminism before and after the 9/11 attacks (Abu-Lughod 2002, Ali 2008, Badran 2005, Massoumi 2015, Rinaldo 2014, Sadiqi 2006., Salem 2013, Vanzan 2012, Zia 2009, Zobair 2015), religious women's agency (Avishai 2008, Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark. 1997, Irshai 2008, Power 2004, Reiter 2016, Rinaldo 2008 and 2014, Singh 2015, Zion-Waldoks 2015), and re-interpretation of religious texts to more feminist interpretations (Butler 2010, Frankenberry 2011, Harrison 2007, Irshai 2008, Muslima n.d., Radford Ruether 1993, Rinaldo 2008, Zia 2009). There are also a few studies which use intersectionality to examine religious women's lives in the same way as one would use race, class, or sexuality (Greenebaum 1991, Salem 2013, Singh 2015, Weber 2015). There were however, a few authors asking why intersectionality isn't being used to explore religious women's lives (Salem 2013 Singh 2015). Within those articles, the authors stated that intersectionality isn't used to describe

religious women's lives because of the level of agency religious women have created within their communities. The levels of agency they've created have reduced oppressions or proven that religious women don't face the same oppressions they used to. I will discuss agency later within this section.

The most common theme from the literature on feminism and religiosity was the secular and religious binary that has been created in feminist discourse (Ali 2008, Abu-Lughud 2002, Badran 2005, Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013, Minister 2013, Petrey 2016, Reilly 2011, van de Brandt 2015, Wallace 1997). Penelope Magee (1995) argues these feminist scholars believe serious, 'academic' scholarship must be secular, unaffected by spirituality and unconcerned with religion. Religious scholarship, either as theology or the study of religion, is deemed 'mystical' and therefore less important. Magee suggests that this attitude is short-sighted and leaves much important material unexplored (Magee 1995, 115).

With the rise of feminism in the 1960's, a common ideology was that religion is inherently patriarchal and oppressive to women (Abu-Lughod 2002, Bedran 2005, Harrison 2007, Irashi 2008, Mikołajczak and Pietrzak 2014, Osman 2011, Nishat 2017, Radford Ruether 1982 & 1993, McDonough 1977). Later feminists then critiqued second-wave feminism as being essentialist, too focused on Western women's experiences, and creating the notion that religious women are brainwashed, blissfully ignorant to their oppression, or openly accepting of it (Avishai 2008; Burke 2012). This perception of religious women keeps them from being able to speak up for themselves and defend or explain themselves without being seen as less than, or worse off, than non-

religious women, and particularly non-religious feminists. Religious feminist women fall into an interesting trap where it seems they aren't accepted within the religious or the feminist discourse.

Some studies on resistance argue feminists of faith value both religion and feminism as integral to their selves, often struggling publicly to uphold both. Since both religious conservatives and secular feminists often treat religious feminists' stance as oxymoronic and inauthentic, they practice dual resistance—towards patriarchal religious norms and (secular) feminism's othering of religion. Insisting their piety is not (only) about strategic “choices” refutes lingering implications that women's best interests lie in “liberation” from religion. (Zion-Waldoks 2015; 76).

I find it interesting that academics, who are assumed to possess critical thinking skills and practices, are so quick to judge a group of individuals who have different faiths than themselves. I have seen this with other people I know, not just academics. There seems to be a hard line drawn between the religious and the non-religious, with no attempt at seeing that there is a large number of people who prove to be religious, liberal, critical, and academic.

Another reason why feminists have an issue with accepting religious feminist views as legitimate is because of modernization. Modernization is supposed to cause a decline in religion and a push away from traditional roles and beliefs, but as we can obviously see, that has not happened for all groups of people. The rise in modernization brought a rise in secularism within academia, and de-legitimated religious discourse in the sciences. I propose that scholars moving forward should stay away from creating this secular/religious binary. Creating and perpetuating a secular/religious binary is exclusionary to studying religious women, and much of the world, considering the

majority of the people in the world define themselves as religious in some way. Power (2004) offers the following argument for why scholars don't study religious women:

Many scholars are reluctant to study people with whom they disagree; instead they prefer to conduct research on women who more closely share their own values or represent models they believe worthy of emulation. Therefore, they saw no need to study such women since they lacked any independent initiative and were merely pawns in the male-dominated political game. (2)

While it makes sense to want to study a group one feels connected to, and it could make research easier, I feel this keeps academics in a bubble of comfort. By studying groups we may not exactly agree with, it opens doors for more dialogue, more empathy, and more understanding of humans and our thought processes and perspectives. I also challenge the idea of women being pawns in the political game later in this section when I discuss religious women's agency and how religion has become a catalyst for many women to take charge of their lives in different socio-political ways.

Feminism Around the World

It's a mistake to assume that secular feminism in the Western world should be the kind of feminism that women around the world should follow. Western feminist scholars must continue to acknowledge that not all feminisms need to adhere to Western notions, and feminisms created in other parts of the world are not "second-hand" or "borrowed" copies of Western feminism. Feminism around the world is created on home soil and will be defined and constructed in ways that appeal to the region where it started. "There are multiple points from which feminisms radiate outward. The West is not the

patrimonial home of feminisms from which all feminisms derive and against which they must be measured” (Badran 2005: 8). And while some women may feel oppressed by their religion, many women feel empowered by it in ways that Western feminists may not understand because of cultural differences. For example, Islamic feminism is still a form of feminism because of its embrace of women’s empowerment and equality, at the same time it also rests within, and contributes to, progressive religious discourse (Abu-Lughod 2002, Ali and Mahmood 2008, Badran 2005, Vanzan 2012, Zia 2009).

Agency

Although the literature I draw on mostly questions the lack of integration between intersectionality, religion and agency, I will attempt here to bring them together using Singh and Spelman’s call for using intersectionality to examine oppression and liberation of religious women. The concept that allows me to do this is that of “agency.” Agency is described as the ability to take action in one’s life. And based on the literature, religion is a major catalyst for women’s agency (Avishai 2008, Beaman-Hall 1997, Bodo 2015, Irshai 2008, Massoumi 2015, Rinaldo 2014, Salem 2013, Singh 2015, Valkonen 2016, Vanza 2012, Weber 2015, Yanaya-Ventura 2016, Zion-Waldoks 2015). Mahmood (2005) states that feminists have difficulty acknowledging religious women’s agency because their feminism is based on secular and liberal ideas that assume people want liberation, as opposed to submitting to religious ideologies. According to Rinaldo, religious women can still become agents in their own lives rather than letting religion act upon them.

“Women can reinterpret religious narratives to resolve life dilemmas, and they draw on the cultural repertoires of their religious communities to forge modern lifestyles.

Religious women’s agency can also be political” (2014). Each group of religious women has a “cultural toolkit” they use to help with their agency. At the same time, they still negotiate the ideologies and identities provided by their religion, and they fight for equality in their own right.

Going through the literature, I found multiple articles about religious women’s agency from around the world. The examples I found show women fighting oppression and gaining liberation. Some examples include women finally fighting for rights within their countries, like Jewish women’s right to pray at the Western Wall in Israel (Reiter 2016), to have a voice in mainstream politics, and to question the necessity of female circumcision (Rinaldo 2014), Evangelical women coming together as a community to help bring aid for domestic abuse victims (Beaman-Hall and Nanson-Clark 1997), or women fighting against patriarchal and oppressive rituals/practices within their religion (Ishari 2008, Reiter 2016, Rinaldo 2008, Zion-Waldoks 2015). In my study I was initially looking for tensions women face within their religions, whether those tensions are caused by religious scripture, peers and interactions, or within their religious families. I never expected to find so much literature about agency, and I’ve come to understand its importance in my own study because the examples of agency I found show what women will do in response to religious and other tensions.

The first example of religious women exerting agency is an organization called Women of the Wall (WoW). In 1967, when Israel gained control of the Western Wall, the

leaders of Orthodox Judaism in Israel stated that the custom of praying at the Wall should reflect the historical aspect of it, which separated men and women during prayer at the Wall, even though historically men and women were allowed to pray at the Wall. Orthodox Jews were successful in keeping women from praying at the wall until 1988. And while women have begun reading Torah at the Wall and attempt to perform bat mitzvah's there, Orthodox Jews continue to protest women's group prayer at the Wall and have fought to only allow men to pray there.

The argument that WoW are making is that the Western Wall should be accessible to all Jews around the world, those who are Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox, but should also be available to Israelites who are secular. "WoW seeks to fight against the exclusion of women in the Orthodox space and bring about a change to Orthodox women's status by changing the perception of the religious woman and educating women about the political, religious, and social rights of women in Judaism" (Reiter 2016; 84). WoW have been working towards the ability to pray on their own at the Wall since 1988. While they have gained access to pray on the Wall because of their efforts, they are still unable to read the Torah there because it can be seen as offensive to others. They have fought continuously for 26 years by using media coverage to gain attention and support. They use education and publicity tactics, and in 2009 another organization called the Kolech Organization joined the fight. These two groups started holding bat mitzvah's, religious coming of age ceremonies for girls, at Robinson's Arch, a new egalitarian plaza located near the wall. "Even as the government has recently been lending a sympathetic ear to pluralism in Judaism and working to reach an

acceptable arrangement to the WoW and the three main streams, Prime Minister Netanyahu is limited in his ability to generate radical changes due to the political power of the Ultra-Orthodox political parties” (Reiter 2016;99). While WoW was successful in strengthening the pan-Jewish character of those who worship at the Western Wall, they haven’t reached all of their goals yet.

The WoW's success in their struggle has created a precedent and a model to be imitated regarding the possibility of breaking a status quo at a holy place in favor of a discriminated-against minority group, in the name of the civil legal norm of freedom of access and freedom of worship at holy places. Until recently it has been accepted that the existing situation named the "status quo" or "local custom" is "sacred" and must be strictly enforced. These arrangements perpetuate the old balance of power and the conservatism and hegemony of one religious group. They force the discrimination of minority groups at holy places that are open to all, which are worshipped by the members of different religious communities. (Reiter 2016: 101).

So while WoW has been able to change the status quo a little bit, and use their agency, they still have farther to go in their fight for equality and the ability to be seen as equals among worshippers at the Wall.

Another example of religious women’s agency is the critical engagement with religious texts. This critical engagement of texts is personalized based on the woman’s idea of feminism and her own personal relationship with her religion.

Critical Engagement with Religious Texts

Rinaldo (2014), who studies Muslim women’s agency in Indonesia, uses the concept of pious critical agency (PCA), which is the ability to engage critically and publically with religious texts. Her concept of PCA is not just creating meaning from

religious texts, but creating political discussions about the text and interpreting the text in ways that can be used for activism as well. In her work she demonstrates how PCA has worked in the activism that has arisen since the 1990's. According to Rinaldo, Feminism and Islam have been converging in Indonesia since the 1980's. Women's rights activism has also been growing since that time and since the 1990's a new generation of pious women has emerged that vastly differs from older generations. These women have access to more middle-class careers and work with NGO's. There are 2 large women's organizations in Indonesia right now, Fataya and the Rahima. Fataya is Indonesia's largest Muslim women's organization. Rahima is a Muslim women's rights organization. These groups host and participate in seminars about developing and disseminating revisionist interpretations of Islamic texts, although its day-to-day foci are programs for low-income women (Rinaldo 2014; 833). Both groups maintain that real Islam supports gender equality, and this aspect of Islam has been obscured by patriarchal interpretations embraced and promoted by government entities. They argue that for social change to occur and for women to be empowered, direct interpretation of the Qur'an is necessary. Additionally, the experience of interpreting the Qur'an is itself empowering. Fataya and Rahima use their re-interpretations of the Qur'an to inform activism and make change within their country. In the same article, Rinaldo (2014) discusses female circumcision (FC) in Indonesia. FC was officially banned in 2006, but some Muslim organizations still condone its practice. In 2011 the Ministry of Health issued guidelines directing doctors to scrape the clitoral hood and not harm the clitoris. In other countries, the clitoris is cut or removed. But many activists insist that although this may be

considered a “safer” alternative than older procedures, it’s still condoning the practice. FC was at first suggested in the Hadiths (the reports, words and actions written by the Muslim prophet Muhammad). The words of the Hadiths can seem ambiguous to some scholars, but at a Fataya seminar, a doctor named Kyai Ahmad handed out pamphlets with the words from the Hadiths. Upon reading the words to the group it was clear that the Hadith only permitted the least invasive form of FC, and stated to not overdo it and that “it is more pleasurable for the woman and more pleasant for the man” (Rinaldo 2014: 837). It also states that FC is NOT mandatory, which is how it had been interpreted by many in Indonesia. Some activists still do not agree with FC being performed at all, despite it being stated in the Hadith that it’s okay to do so. Many feel that FC is still used to control women’s sexuality and any doctor can still botch a procedure, thus harming a woman for life. Muslim anti-FC activists claim that FC is a human rights violation and a health hazard. As of now, FC is still a common procedure for young girls in Indonesia because some still see it as a legitimate religious practice. While the less invasive form of FC is the only one that is currently legal, there have been multiple changes in procedures requiring FC because of pushback from religious authority figures, who state that women who are not circumcised are not to be recognized as real Muslims. Activists are still fighting to completely get rid of the procedure.

The final example I will share of women becoming agents within their lives are the Agunah activists (Zion-Waldoks 2015). Within more pious Orthodox Jewish communities around the world, women must follow the Halakha, the Orthodox Jewish law. In some highly religious communities, the process of civil divorce is similar to the

US but there is also the Jewish divorce, which must be processed through Orthodox Jewish law. Many times, women want to get divorced from their husbands, which is permitted through the civil courts but Jewish law states that the only way a couple can divorce is when the husband provides the wife with a “get.” In Israel, jurisdiction of marriages and divorces is conducted through religious authorities, and Jewish law is the standard. There is no difference between civil courts and Jewish religious courts. But in Israel, unlike other countries, if a husband refuses to produce a get for his wife, he can be sent to prison. While this isn’t too common, it has happened. Sometimes, husbands will move to another country without providing a get, thus leaving his wife stranded. Many times, husbands refuse to provide a get, which leaves their wives chained to a dead marriage. When women become agunots (Jewish term for “chained”) they are unable to re-marry legitimately under Jewish law, and any new child they have with a new spouse will be seen as illegitimate. Agunah activists are fighting against non-egalitarian marriage, and for the ability for women to divorce their husbands without needing his consent. An organization called the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot (ORA) works with NGO’s or privately.

Although goals and strategies differ, collectively the movement works to abolish, circumvent, or, at least, severely limit the pervasive abuse, extortion, and systemic discrimination against Jewish women in divorce processes. Despite a relatively small number of activists, the movement’s public campaign has achieved substantial success over the past quarter century. Agunah activists helped hundreds of women obtain a get (Jewish writ of divorce), instigated public debate, led educational campaigns, passed groundbreaking legislation, petitioned both Rabbinic and civil Courts, accrued political power, including sway over appointments of Rabbinic Court judges, and promoted numerous solutions to the problem (most unimplemented) (Zion-Waldoks 2014: 80).

ORA has helped over 200 women receive gets from their husbands, using mediators and lawyers from both sides of the law to make sure the process is smooth and without more harm to each party. The women in these groups are all examples of using pious critical agency in their lives in order to fight an oppressive force.

Re-interpretation of Religious Texts

All the literature on religion and women discussed the practice of (re)interpretation (Abu-Lughud et. al) of religious texts, feminist texts practices, rituals, and identities. Jewish women, according to the literature, are the group amongst whom re-interpretive practices were most common. I discussed one example of this re-interpretation earlier when I talked about the Women of the Wall. They interpreted the practice of praying at the Wall as a right for all Jews and fought for that right (Reiter 2016). Irshai (2016) discusses the ways in which other Jewish feminists re-interpreted and recreated Jewish practices in a more inclusive way. Some examples were making bat-mitzvah's (a coming of age ritual for young Jewish girls) more accepted and celebrated for females of all ages with a special ritual to honor Miriam (a female figure within the Torah) and also recreating Rosh Chodesh (New Moon) rituals. Yanaya-Ventura's (2016) article explored how Jewish feminist women found a way to live both a religious and feminist life by compromising between both discourses.

They refused to use a language that divides between religious subordination and feminism autonomy. They did not see one order as subsidiary to the other.....it was a form of feminist religiosity or religious feminism that constructs a new line of action defined by distances; a creation of something new rather than a simple

mediation. It is a different way of thinking and acting within and without subordination, taking fragments of each tradition (both religious and feminist) and bypassing what is taken for granted in each tradition by escaping to the margins of a custom that is neither part of hegemonic religion nor entirely part of the liberal conception of feminism (Yanaya-Ventura 2016; 22).

This re-articulation of religion and feminism was also seen in Zion-Waldoks (2015) article on Jewish women practicing what she calls “devoted resistance,” which is activism fueled by staying devoted to a relationship (religion) within which they may feel they need to challenge traditional practices.

Christian Women Re-interpretations of the Bible

According to literature (Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark 1997, Harrison 2007, van de Brandt 2015) Christian women have their own way of interpreting religion with their lives. Beaman-Hall (1997) discusses how Evangelical women re-interpret the Bible as a way to help, and provide resources for, women who suffer from spousal abuse. While in the Evangelical community there is a belief that all Christian homes follow Christian ideals and spousal abuse shouldn't occur, it still does. The Evangelical women who aid abuse victims use the Bible as a calling to help victims, whether the women have differing beliefs from them or not. It's important for Evangelical women to give back to those in their community, and there's a common belief that women should not be treated poorly by her husband, despite what some verses in the Bible may say (Beaman-Hall 1997).

Petrey's (2016) article on feminist's re-interpretation of the Heavenly Mother illustrates how women used the deity of the Heavenly Mother as a way to counter the all-encompassing "male god-head" and to include the Mother as a representation for all women. While some will argue that having a single feminine deity can be problematic, some Mormon women are using it as a way to feel closer to a feminine goddess. Moving away from the male form of God gives them a specific level of comfort and inclusivity within their faith (Petrey 2016).

Muslim Women and Interpretation of Islam

When searching for literature on religious feminist women, many of the first articles were focused on Islamic feminism after 9/11 (Abu-Lughud 2002, Badran 2005, Massoumi 2015, Sadiqi 2006, Salem 2013, Vanzan 2012, Zia 2009, Zobair 2015). They all mention that Islamic feminism has been around much longer than 2001. Right after the 9/11 attacks on NYC and the Pentagon, the Bush administration declared a War On Terrorism. The administration claimed that the fight against terror was also a fight for the rights and dignity of women, specifically Muslim women, who were framed as being oppressed in their countries. It's ironic that saving Muslim women was used to justify starting a war, when in reality war creates more violence for women such as sexual assault by soldiers, loss of family, and caring for the children, injured, and elderly.

Massoumi (2015) highlights how

Such rescue narratives ignore both the impact of war and militarisation and the diversity and richness of Muslim women's lives. Stories about Muslim women are told through voyeuristic accounts of honour crimes or the oppression of veiling,

rather than political, social, and historical analysis of the development of repressive regimes that may have shaped Muslim women's lives. (722)

This victim ideology, coupled with the secular feminist ideologies that have been around the US for 30 years, created in feminist scholarship the idea of the "Third world woman." Salem (2013) states that the

discursive construction of third world women as homogenous and disempowered is similar to the construction of religious women as uniformly and automatically oppressed or suffering from false consciousness. Religious women are thus produced as a homogenous bloc who cannot or will not see the inherent patriarchy in religion. When it comes to Muslim women, this is amplified due to the already-prevalent construction of third world women (of which Muslim women are assumed to belong to) as oppressed and victimized. This construction serves to hide the specificities of each woman's lived reality and instead centers the debate on false consciousness. (1)

As the literature suggests, Muslim women are no more prey to oppressive forces than Western women are, and as stated earlier, it's dangerous to assume this higher level of oppression simply because of cultural differences between the West and Muslim countries. It's also harmful to assume that Islamic feminism is simply a reaction or a "copy-cat" of Western feminism.

Badran's (2005) article does a wonderful job of explaining the rise of secular and Islamic feminisms in the Middle East. While secularism became more widespread, so did Islam. Badran states that secularism and Islamization of the Middle East was co-constructed, that neither discourse would have grown without the other (Badran 2005). While secularism favored modernity, Islam favored the traditional. Islamic feminism however took from both sides.

Islamic feminism took from secular feminism its Islamic modernist strand and made progressive religious discourse its paramount discourse. And, in doing so,

Islamic feminism extended secular feminism's Islamic modernist strand and made it more radical by affirming the unqualified equality of all human beings. It affirmed the equality of women and men as insan across the public/private spectrum, and it grounded its assertions in new readings of the Qur'an. Secular feminism insisted on the full equality of women and men in the public sphere but accepted a model of gender complementarity in the private or family sphere. Interestingly, it accepted the model of different and complimentary but also hierarchical gender roles in the family privileging male authority. Islamic feminism did not. Islamic feminism insists upon the practice of social justice, which cannot be achieved in the absence of full gender equality. Islamic feminism has yet to become a widely-based social movement, the way secular feminisms became organized movements (Badran 2005: 14).

Research has proven that Islam is seen by Muslim women as a feminist religion (Abu-Lughud 2002, Ali 2008, Badran 2005, Massoumi 2015, Rinaldo 2008 & 2014, Sadiqi 2006, Salem 2013, Vanzan 2012, Zia 2009, Zobair 2015). Although many Muslim women believe that, there are still instances of Muslim women becoming more prominent in the public sphere in order to have a say in their own lives. Both of Rinaldo's articles (2008, 2014) discuss Muslim women in Indonesia becoming a part of the mainstream public voice. Earlier I identified the two groups in Indonesia, Fataya and the Rahima, that use re-interpretations of the Qur'an in order to make change for women's and girl's lives by trying to change the practice of female circumcision. Women are using the Qur'an and their religious practice of wearing a hijab (headscarf) to also challenge Western notions of their oppression. Throughout Rinaldo's article there are quotes from Muslims about the politics behind wearing the hijab. Some say it's a way for women to show who is more pious or virtuous than others. Some were stating it's become a political strategy, while others state it's a way for them to show pride in her country while also being a pious Muslim (Rinaldo 2014). In the end, none of these statements are wrong, because

they are all based on individual interpretation. Muslim women have also taken to interpreting the Qur'an in their own way. One argument about interpretation of the Qur'an is that it's historically been interpreted by men, which leads to a patriarchal society, not so much a patriarchal religion. Salem states that there needs to be a "return" to the Qur'an, where men and women both re-interpret the scriptures in order to make it more egalitarian (2013). Vanzan states that

According to "Islamic feminists" vision, women's rights have already been guaranteed by the egalitarian ethics spread by Islam since its very beginning; but, in practice, the original Islamic message has been hindered by the jurisprudence produced by patriarchs in the course of the centuries. Now it is necessary to re-establish Qur'anic justice, in the light of contemporary life and its exigencies" (2012).

So Muslim women have started to re-interpret the Qur'an in their own way to change the society. An example of this was presented in the last section where Muslim women worked to clarify the language of the Hadith and re-interpreted the Qur'an to counter the practice of female circumcision. These kinds of interpretation can be seen throughout all 3 Abrahamic religions. It's not the religion that created the patriarchal system, rituals, and ideologies. It's those who originally interpreted them as such, and now is the time for re-articulation for them all.

CH 3. METHODS

Introduction

As I have described, my goal was to interview 10 women who identified as Christian, Jewish or Muslim, and as feminists. I decided to only study Christian, Jewish and Muslim women because these three religions are not only the largest, but I assumed I would have an easier time finding women from these faiths within Humboldt County. One major limitation to the study was geographical location. I had anticipated interviewing more Christian women than Jewish or Muslim women, simply because Humboldt County is a small rural community where Christianity is mostly practiced. I assumed I would find more Jewish and Muslim women around the college campus through instructors or students, and that is exactly what happened. I would have much preferred to interview equal numbers of women from each Abrahamic religion, but it wasn't possible.

To find appropriate candidates to interview I had to operationalize religiosity and feminism. Religiosity can be measured in many ways. Prior ways of measuring religiosity range from asking participants to rate their own level of religiosity (Nudelman 1976, Vernon 1962, Wimberly 1989), to engagement with scripture and involvement in religious communities (González 2011). For my purposes, I recognized that women engage with their religion in significantly different ways. Some women might attend services weekly, monthly, or yearly. Others don't attend services and only read scripture,

while others only follow holiday or daily rituals. Some people who define themselves as religious pray every day before a meal, every morning and night, or only when they feel intense moments of stress and need some time to speak out loud. Some people don't pray, attend services, or read scripture, but are full of faith. For my study, the only criteria for religiosity I used was women who attend services and/or read scripture at least 2 times a month. I chose these criteria because I didn't want to limit my sample, and I also wanted to interview women who were active within their religious community and faith.

Focusing on the word of scripture was something I asked them about, so current engagement with scripture was important. I also asked them about interactions they have had with others in their religious community. For example, I asked about whether they bring up feminist issues in their faith communities and if there were any instances of tensions based on differing beliefs about gender within scriptures and religious culture.

When I was just starting to formulate this study, people asked me how I would define feminism to find my participants. I decided that it shouldn't be up to me to decide what shape of the women's feminism or how deep into feminist discourse the women were. If they identified as a feminist, that was enough. I didn't want to limit my study to only a particular type of feminism or a specific amount of academic feminist knowledge. Everyone has their own interpretation of what feminism is and what it means to them, especially religious women, and that's what I wanted to explore. I wanted to see if there was a difference in how women from different religious faiths, racial backgrounds or educational backgrounds interpret feminism.

After screening for engagement with their faith (as well as defining themselves as feminists), and being 18 years of age or older, I did no other screening. I looked for women of any race, sexuality, class, nationality, and ability.

Sampling

To find participants, I reached out to religious groups in 2 cities in Humboldt County. I emailed pastors, rabbis, and imams and informed them of my study and asked if they could pass along the message of my study. I placed posters on local community bulletin boards and on the Humboldt State campus as well. I also used social media sites such as Facebook to find participants, which helped me access people outside of Humboldt County (since being local was not mandatory for this study). Only one interview was done through Skype and that was with a woman who lives in Sacramento. Snowball sampling was used throughout the study in order to find more participants as well.

Participants

I let the women choose pseudonyms in order to keep their confidentiality. Of the 11 women interviewed, 6 were Christian, one was Jewish and 4 were Muslim. The pseudonyms and ages of the Christian women are Apple (65), LuLu (74), Redd (68), Star (69), Patty (37) and Celestina (35). Out of the 6 Christian women interviewed, 4 are retired and white. Patty and Celestina were the only non-retired Christian women, both are currently working. Patty was the only non-white Christian woman, she is Chinese.

Most lived in Humboldt County for many years and were Christians for their entire lives. All 6 Christian women either had been or continue to be teachers, spanning many fields such as Marine Biology, Earth Science, Special Needs, ESL and other language courses, math, and religious studies. All of the women were married except for two (Star and Redd). The Jewish woman (Hana) was in her 50's, married, a lesbian, and a Marriage and Family Therapist. The Muslim women were Mo (23), Dee (19), Anne (21) and Fae (27). Mo, Dee, and Anne are all students with immigrant parents. They were all raised in California. Fae is the only married woman of the Muslim participants and was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. Fae was also a teacher before moving to Humboldt County. Since I was only able to interview one Jewish woman (Hana), I use accounts and interviews from other Jewish women from the internet as data, their names are Helena and Shifra.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over an 8 month period. Interviews were anywhere from 45 minutes to 1 hour long and held in coffee shops, church offices, libraries, and work offices. Intensive interviews (Charmaz 2014: 56) were used and participants were asked about their (1) religious backgrounds and childhoods, (2) introduction to and impressions of feminism, (3) current ideas and beliefs about feminism, and (4) various questions about their social relationships with family, romantic partners, religious peers, and colleagues. I also asked them questions about how their identity as a religious feminist woman affected their choices on life decisions such

as finding a partner, having a family and how to raise that family, and choices in career.

We also discussed the issue of reproductive rights.

I recorded the interviews and used grounded theory coding while transcribing the data (Charmaz 2014: 111). I used open and selective coding (ThePRPost) after reading through all the transcripts and found 5 major themes within the data: 1. history, culture, and religion 2. creating feminism 3. relationships with God and religious texts, 4. using religion as a guide when making life choices and 5. tense interactions. I also used memo-writing (Charmaz 2014: 164) as a way of organizing my notes.

CH 4. DATA ANALYSIS

As I noted above, five major themes arose as I analyzed the interviews: the first theme is history, culture and religion. In the first theme, most women discussed ways that people often collapse the ideas of culture and religion, and made a point to state that culture and religion are in fact different. Culture was mostly discussed among the Muslim women, while the Christian and Jewish women discussed the historical culture when their Holy texts were created, and how that shapes what was written within them. The second theme discussed was the women's relationship with, and interpretation of, their Holy text and their God. In this theme the Christian and Jewish women talked more about the scripture than the Muslim women did, and the women all had different relationships with religious texts. While reading their religious texts, the women create a personal understanding of God, as well as creating agency within their lives by using their feminist and religious beliefs. I explore their agency by asking them about the major life choices they have made or will make in the future. The third theme was Feminism. The Christian women also talked about the culture of feminism they grew up in, which was very different from the feminism in which the Muslim women grew up. The Christian women's feminism was more secular, while the Muslim women's feminism included Islam. The fourth theme was how they use religion as a guide when making life choices. The final theme, and the main reason for conducting this study, was to see what tensions religious feminist women face throughout their lives, and every woman had a story to share.

History, Culture and Religion

In almost every interview conducted, the women brought up differences and connections between culture and religion. This was a common discussion that I was not expecting to have for every interview. However, how culture and religion was discussed differed between each religious group. Amongst Christian and Jewish women, most pointed out that they understood how the Bible can be interpreted as patriarchal or oppressive but also point out the historical context in which the Bible or the Torah was written and re-written. The Bible and the Torah are thousands of years old and reflects the ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes relevant to the culture at the time. Hana, the one Jewish woman interviewed said:

It [the re-writing of the Torah] was a fertile spiritual time in the world and that's when the Torah was redacted. What we know from all of those traditions was that it was a time in which most of the world was patrilineal and there was distinction between roles.

This quote is Hana's explanation that during the time the Torah was written, it was common place for families and institutions to have male figures in charge. Redd (White, Christian, 68) also explains the difference in culture for women and how it affected how the Bible was written.

What we all have to realize, I wish everyone would realize this, is that the Bible was written in a very special time when women had no place and so everything was he. I was going to say it was like the Spanish where everything is masculine: if there is six women and one man, it will be referred to as the masculine. So the Bible is more like that but it's worse than that because of the time it was written and translated.

These are examples of the women explaining that they understand why their religious texts are written from a masculine frame. They were written at a time when the culture surrounding women was different than it is now. Back then, women didn't have access to the same resources as men did, and they made no contributions to religious texts, so it's understandable why the religious texts have a male focus.

Although the Christian Bible has been re-written multiple times, the expectations about gender seem to have stayed the same within the Bible; there is still strong, separate gender roles and expectations for men and women. For Christian women, the issues they faced with differences in culture and religion came from interactions with people in their lives. The four Christian women I interviewed who were retired were adults during the women's movement of the 1960's, so they had different experiences of feminism and grew up in a time when feminist culture was strong, but with a different narrative than feminism today. They discussed times in their lives when they had to march and fight for reproductive rights, equal pay, and independence. Apple (65, Christian) said "I was second wave feminism, I was part of the feminist women's health collective in LA in 1971....it wasn't that long ago that I was marching...I was fighting for the right to have the option of having an abortion, we didn't have that." Some Christian participants discussed how Christianity's writings of women's roles had been a part of American culture at that time and women were finally fighting against it. Redd (68) stated "We were a working class family...my mother worked, which was not typical for the time." The majority of the women I interviewed grew up in families with egalitarian values already, they all had mothers and grandmothers who worked. The older Christian women

all had working mothers too, during the time when feminists were marching for the right to work and for more independence. LuLu (65) said “I grew up in a time when women didn’t smoke, no drinking, nice women didn’t wear shorts into town...I never thought that I couldn’t go to work or get an education, my parents felt like all of us were going to do that.” So while the Christian women grew up in a time and space where Christian ideals of femininity and gender roles were heavily adhered to, there was still no question or doubt as to their own independence. They all understood the history behind their religion, and acknowledged that the texts were overly masculine. But ultimately they remained true to their faith, followed more feminist cultural practices and integrated the feminist values they grew up with into their religious lives.

The topic of culture and religion was different for the Muslim women. First, when I asked the Muslim women about re-writes of the Qur’an, they said it was only written one time, and the only re-writes come with translating from Arabic to English. Therefore the Qur’an doesn’t have the same history of revision as the other two holy texts, but particularly not the revision history of the Christian Bible. In terms of the effects of culture, three of the four Muslim women had parents who immigrated to the US from Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. These three participants grew up in the US. One woman was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. There are major cultural differences between the Saudi Arabian woman (Fae, 27) and the other Muslim women; the largest one is the difference in the way men and women are treated. Fae (27, Muslim), talked about how difficult it was for her to come to the US and interact with men who were not her family. In Saudi Arabia she rarely spoke with men who were outside of her family.

While she led a fairly gender segregated life in Saudi Arabia, she talked about working as a teacher in Saudi Arabia and how different that was from her mother, who stayed home.

Fae, who learned about feminism from her husband, discussed how Islam and culture differ in Saudi Arabia. Fae said

There are a lot of things I never thought about in Saudi Arabia but when I came here I started thinking about. Now when we go to Saudi Arabia and I talk to my family about not wearing my niqab or covering my face, they tell me to shut up. The niqab is not part of Islam though, that's just Saudi culture."

Some of the other things she never thought about before were topics such as praying in the same space with a group of men within a mosque, driving a car, or teaching her young daughter about feminism. Fae was also the only one of the Muslim women who came from a conservative Muslim family and grew up in Saudi Arabia, a country known for its strict gender segregation in most aspects of life. It was interesting to hear that she had learned about feminism through her husband, who brought her to California to join him while he gets an education at Humboldt State.

The other 3 Muslim women I interviewed all came from self-identified liberal Muslim families. As stated earlier, these women all had at least one parent emigrate from a Middle Eastern country and all grew up Muslim. They all touched on the differences in roles between men and women, and boys and girls in their families outside of the US.

The Muslim women I interviewed have all have seen differences in gender expectations and roles within their families in the US and abroad, and while they may not agree with the more strict rules, they still respect them because of the relationships they have with their families. They all talked about making comments and trying to talk to their families

about their disapproval of some cultural practices, such as more inheritance money going to the male next of kin, but they understand that it's what their family grew up in and they decided to not have their own family follow the same rules.

They also discussed how US media tends to portray Middle Eastern cultural practices as religious practices, which leads Americans to think that Islam is an oppressive and dangerous religion. There are differences in the way Islam is practiced and how cultures manifest themselves, and they tend to get blurred together. Dee (19, Muslim) explains by saying:

Some of the things we were talking about has NOTHING to do with religion, it's the culture. Women are not the prophets, but women are supposed to be one of the first things you think of when you think of love. First you think of God or Allah and then your mother. No one else. That is the order you love in. And your dad goes after that, so it's not even like you look at the man first. But then you look at society and you look at the culture and you see the man is the top...he's in charge of everything and the mom is supposed to respect that... but when you look at different cultures, it's not how it's seen.

Ann (Muslim) also explains how Islam and culture get mixed together when she says:

This is part of the reason why Islam is so twisted in the media today, because not everyone understands how Islam works and is organized. So in the Qur'an it may say women stay home, and people take that and say "oh Islam is so bad" but if you look at the Hadiths [writings of the prophet Muhammed], Muhammad explains that yes that's how it's done traditionally, but if the woman would like to work or if the household needs her, then that's what she can do.

As I stated earlier, after 9/11 the US became very Islamophobic. A war was started against countries in the Middle East and it was justified because Islam was being defined as dangerous and harmful to women. Mo and Dee share a little about what it's like to be a Muslim woman in light of that common, anti-Muslim, narrative.

Mo was the only Muslim woman who did not wear a hijab. She says

I'm very open with my faith and saying who I am and my faith has impacted the way I dress. My personal identity as a Muslim woman, this is what I look like. It's part of who I am, whether I'm including that as part of who I am is something I've always had apprehension about it. It's weird not telling everyone about it. A lot of that has come from growing up with the stigma of being a Muslim in all honesty. Growing up during 9/11 it was like....we aren't going to talk about it anymore.

Dee, who wears a hijab, also says

In this community, I notice I get a lot of stares...people look uncomfortable. And that makes me uncomfortable. Why are you staring at me like that? Sometimes I forget I'm wearing the scarf even though I wake up every morning and put it on, and I forget that I look different from everyone else.

Mo and Dee were the only Muslim women to talk about these difficulties with sharing their identities with non-Muslims. These quotes show that Muslim women in the US have vastly different experiences than women of other religions because of the narrative our media has created about Islam. Because the US is a predominantly Christian nation, Muslims know they are in the minority. Muslim women especially feel like outsiders when they wear their hijabs as well, as it's a signifier of their religious beliefs. While they shared these perspectives, we must take into account that Dee lives in a small rural community, not the community where she grew up. Her new community does not have the same Muslim population as where she grew up, so the hijab is a signifier of a minority religious tradition.

Relationship with God and Religious Texts

Naturally in any discussion about religion, especially the Abrahamic ones, God was a common topic of conversation. Four of the 6 Christian women talked about how they view God, and their journey in interpreting God. Some used inclusive language within their sermons or prayers. Star (69, Christian), a pastor said:

Inclusive language about God really lags behind in church. Inclusive language for people, everyone was on board with. But you're no longer singing God loves all men, but actually referring to God in female terms has been a slower and more difficult process, even in more progressive churches. I can remember 10 years ago having a conversation with clergy women who said they're okay with female language for God...and I was like well why don't we hear it? Every six months someone will say "he or she" and people will laugh.... that's not what we are talking about. So that was one thing I loved about coming here, Carrie would end the service with "May God the mother and father of us all bless and" If I really want to make a point, I'll rephrase my statement to just say God instead of he or she. He or she is a bit awkward...I tried using "they" once and it didn't really work. On Mother's day I was preaching feminine images of God and I used She instead because of the day.

Redd (Christian), who attends Star's church, was shocked upon hearing a new conceptualization of God that she never thought of, she said:

I burst into tears....I just had never heard [that]... God is often referred in the female gender, you know when they're talking about God sometimes when they pray they'll say She and I like that. It's not important to me because God is all genders. I don't think that God is limited, I don't believe in the white beard. But some people do and I wouldn't be able to go to church like that, but "God the Mother and Father"... I was like HUUUUHHHHH (sigh) It was just... I felt like I could breathe, it was just amazing.

Lulu (Christian) also attends Star and Redd's church. She shared that she had moments when she would step back and rethink what God is to her:

When I was a child I thought of a God as a man on a throne with a beard. Because at that age I could understand Father. As I got older, I thought "well God's not just a person up there. I don't believe heaven has streets made of gold." I'm not the same as I was when I was a kid. And people shouldn't keep that image. You should grow and you should be open to that.

Hana (Jewish) has her own way of re-interpreting and understanding God. She said that she changes pronouns as she reads the Torah:

A lot of what I started to do was make my own translations. So what I've been doing is just insert the word God, or leave the pronoun out as I'm reading it. Or I'll insert in my mind the Holy Something instead of his or whatever, because the entire language is gendered, inanimate objects are gendered similar to most languages.

Esther is a woman I did not interview personally, but she was interviewed by a journalist about her own religious and feminist beliefs. Esther is an Orthodox Jewish woman, whose father was a Rabbi. When she was asked if she sees God as a male or female, she said:

In Judaism, we're not supposed to have any image of G-d because G-d is beyond human form. I don't view G-d as male or female, even though I may say "He." In the Torah, when it says, "And G-d spoke," it's put in a masculine form, but the word "G-d" is really genderless. The Torah was written in Hebrew, the language of G-d, and one of the beauties of Hebrew is that everything is gender-oriented; there's no non-gender. Every word is a masculine word or a feminine word, every color is a masculine color or a feminine color, every number is a masculine number or a feminine number. It's either one or the other. When we talk about a chair, we use a masculine pronoun for the chair. Does that mean the chair is masculine instead of feminine? No, and we don't ascribe human qualities to a chair. I'm not comparing G-d to a chair at all. My point is that the Hebrew language forces us to choose one gender or the other. If Hebrew had an "it," that might be what G-d would have used-, but G-d chose masculine and it's never bothered me. (Chabad.org)

These interpretations of religious figures have allowed women to take control of their religiosity and define it for themselves. Instead of seeing or feeling tensions within

their religions, they have found ways to have faith that works best for them. Hana and Esther both recognize the language of the Torah is masculine, yet that is just the nature of the language and not to be interpreted literally.

It was most common for the Christian women and Jewish woman to discuss their interpretation of their religious texts. While the Muslim women talked about small disagreements they may have had within the texts, there was never a mention of the process of reading passages and making meaning of them in their own way. The Muslim women read the Qur'an and accept it as it is, there was no major questioning of verses or the words within the Qur'an. The Muslim women were mostly students, and had explained that while they know they should read the Qur'an more, they don't have as much time as they used to, because they need to focus on their studies. They do still find time to pray, which made them eligible for my study. The Christian and Jewish women I interviewed all had similar beliefs in that if the Torah or the Bible are followed literally, it causes more harm than good. They all said that the historical context of the texts need to be taken into account and that interpreting them becomes a subjective act.

An example of thinking about historical context of texts is provided by the following exchange where Esther (Judaism) was asked by the journalist about a specific prayer that Jewish men recite that says "Thank you Lord, for not making me a woman". This prayer has been perceived negatively, claiming it shows men acknowledging the privileges they have that women don't. Esther says:

[About the morning prayer] You see, non-Jews were given seven commandments, the universal laws of mankind. So we thank Gd that he made us Jewish so that we have more than those seven. Jewish slaves were exempt from certain

commandments because they could only do the commandments that would fit into their master's schedule. Then there's one more group that has fewer commandments than men, and that's women. So men say, "Thank you for not making me a woman so I can have *-even more* commandments to do." This is the rationale, and it suits me okay. But even if it wouldn't, I'm not throwing away the tapestry because of one misstitch [prayer]. It's not enough to make me say, "Well, how chauvinistic, if that's in there I can't accept anything." Why can't I accept everything? So my prayers in the morning go a little quicker because I skip out that line and a half. It's one of those things that gets so much attention—it's as if it's in twice as big a font as everything else in the prayer book. But, I know, it makes for good conversation. (Chabad.org)

Esther explained that she won't let one prayer affect her spirituality and her relationship with her faith. If anything, she makes a joke about how she has less prayers and less to do every morning than Jewish men. While she's not compromising or integrating her feminism into her religious life in this instance, she's accepted that this prayer is something that's not meant for her and chooses not to be upset and dwell on it.

Hana (Jewish) brought up an interesting point about how religious texts can be interpreted in a negative way, when in reality the scripture was meant to be helpful. Hana stated:

We see rules about how men have to treat women but not vice versa. The only rule for women is to not commit adultery. Men on the other hand can have multiple wives but that was eventually taken out, and as long as the man was able to support both...he was not allowed to favor a wife and treat her and her kids better etc. There were protections for women who have been accused of adultery. There's a lot of things like that look to the modern feminist eye as [how] patriarchal and oppressive the Torah is, but looking at the context of when it was written, it was a movement away from women being arbitrarily harmed by a patriarchal society. The Torah was an attempt to democratize what was becoming a very patriarchal system. So there is a lot of separation between men and women's roles but I think the attempt is to move it into the direction of equality.

Star (Christian), who received a Master's in Christian education, shares her knowledge of the Bible by explaining a commonly misinterpreted verse.

In Ephesians it starts with "husbands love your wives." the verse before it is "Submit to one another" but in most bibles, those verses are separated as if they are different verses. And then there's this heading about Christian households or something, people couldn't put those two together. It's like "no, women submitted." Now men were supposed to be nicer to them than they often were...but that's a whole separate thing. If you dig deeply into what marriage was like culturally at that time, the woman's role was defined with submissive terms but men were not instructed to love them as they love their own body. Or to care and honor them. Historically, it's a step towards respect for women. I wouldn't say equality but a valuing of the personhood of the women. But of course, read in a feminist culture, it sounds like 'let's take a baseball bat to Paul'.

These were interesting observations, and they showed the extensive knowledge Hana and Star have of their religious texts. Hana (Jewish) stated that she reads the Torah every Sunday, and that's her time to process and come to learn the Torah in a way that is relevant to her and makes sense to her life.

If you read it at the literal level, it would be harmful to someone, it's not supposed to be taken literally. For example, an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth, was interpreted by the sages of the Talmud to mean if you accidentally put out someone's eye, you have to pay monetary damages that would equal to their losses. So eye for eye is like an equality standard, not a literal take someone's eye out. I believe that those 2 verses about men not sleeping with men as with women, are that type that cannot be taken literally. What they're really talking about is our archetypal energies. It says at the beginning of the Torah "and so god created them, male and female, created he them." One creature was created, named Adam, and it was a human. What ADAM means is earthling, because adaman means earth. So an earthling was created male and female and we know by science now that we all have male and female hormones, male and female everything. And we know through psychology, we have all anima and animus, we all have the archetypal energies of both. So I believe those statements about men not lying with men as with women is about not overemphasizing our male archetypal characteristics because its disastrous when that happens, look at the world now. And every denomination except the orthodox at this point accept that you don't take those verses literally and have accepted their LGBTQ members,

even the conservatives. The orthodox are still struggling with it, but at least they're struggling with it. I think that's another part of the ethos of Judaism, nothing is absolute ever for all time. Everything is supposed to be struggled with.

Hana specifically talks about a common phrase used within Christian fundamentalist and Orthodox Jewish rhetoric to explain that homosexuality is a sin, but as we can see here, she interprets it in a way that makes sense to her. As a Jewish lesbian woman she saw that the verse is harmful for her and other LGBT people, and she interpreted it in a way that is more inclusive. Hana also states, when it comes to interpreting the Torah:

I think any form of cherry picking is a loss of opportunity of depth. For me to take a part of the Torah that I hate and say 'I hate reading this'.....and instead saying "okay, what else could this say? If this were my dream, what would it mean? If I change my perspective on this, what could it teach me?' I'm going to get a lot more out of it than if I just not pay attention to that verse I don't like. I'm missing everything below the surface. The challenge is to go below the patriarchal surface of anything and see what was under it before the patriarchy put its veneer on it.

This quote from Hana brings up another common theme talked about with textual interpretation: cherry picking. Cherry picking is the practice of taking portions of texts and focusing on a single aspect and basing opinion on it, without taking the rest of the verse into consideration. Hana explained how she tries not to cherry pick and instead creates her own meaning of texts with which she may not initially agree. Four of the six of the Christian women mentioned cherry picking too, and mentioned the same verse Hana mentioned, of "man lying with man as with a woman is an abomination." Although they didn't give as detailed explanations of re-interpreting the verse as Hana did, they all did say that they disagreed with the choosing of that one verse and using it to create

harmful views of the LGBT community. I asked the women if there were verses they read that they didn't agree with or have issues with, and the book of Paul was brought up by a few of the Christian women.. According to the women there's a common phrase feminists quote from Paul stating that women must submit to their husbands, but that's been proven to be a form of cherry picking. Patty (37, Christian) explains:

There's a specific passage in Paul about the roles of a husband and wife, and everyone loves to quote it because they very conveniently leave out the second part which is about wives submitting to their husbands, and then it goes on to say that husbands need to love their wives as Christ loves the church which he kind of died for the church, but that part is usually swept to the side.

With this quote, Patty is showing that people will cherry pick a specific line in order to create an argument, while leaving out the rest, which truly explains the entire verse.

Celestina (Christian) also had a comment about cherry picking:

There's certain things....like one scripture about women should not teach men...there's other scripture that tells sons to respect the father teaching. You have to take the scripture as a whole as everything.

The topic of cherry picking was common, and I found it interesting how often the women brought it up without me asking about it. They all have observed people cherry picking and using specific verses to further their own agenda. The women mostly talked about conservative's using the Bible to justify harmful beliefs, such as homophobia. What I found even more interesting was that these women all see religious people cherry picking and shared how dangerous it is because of its shallowness. And yet while I was researching feminist discourse on religion, there was just as much cherry picking happening. Religious groups and academics alike were cherry picking religious texts in

order to validate their own observation or belief. The women all knew their religious texts well and were able to critically analyze them in ways people who choose to cherry pick can't. This is why I wanted to interview women who were knowledgeable about their texts and religious communities because I knew their understanding of their faith would be concrete.

A specific criteria I had for participants was that they read scripture at least 2 times a week. I wanted to see the relationships women had with the scripture, if there were tensions between what they read and what they experience or believe. The Christian and Jewish women talked more about the scripture than the Muslim women did, and the women all had different relationships with it. Star (69, Christian) and Celestina (35, Christian) had similar relationships to scripture because they both got their Master's degrees in Theology or Religious Studies. While their level of education of scripture doesn't prove higher levels of religiosity over the other women, it shows a more critical perspective of the texts themselves. Star shows her extensive knowledge and relationship with the Bible with this quote:

I was taught that there were 12 [disciples], all these men. And then becoming aware of the places where things were deliberately covered up. Like there's a letter, I think to the Romans, and Paul is writing and he's talking about greeting various people and the apostle Junia. Which is a feminine Greek name....and there's no evidence in any literature from that era that it was ever a man's name. So because in the Bible, in the King James and in the revised standard, it was translated as Junius and turned into a male. So it's kind of like....at the time they were translating the Bible they were like "well that can't be right" so it's just....then there's Phoebe...who's referred to as a deaconess. And we do that in English...and in Greek it's very clear that she's the deacon. And that has authority with it, she actually took the letter and read it and interpreted it. But it's made to sound in English like she just hands it over to some man to take over...and even the women who were clearly there at the cross, that was never emphasized, all the

disciples fled and left him alone....well no they didn't. There were 3 women and 1 man who stayed. And it's almost like "well the disciples that count are the ones who fled"...there was a feel to it, like there was no need to lift it up or point to it.

This quote shows Star's strained relationship with the Bible, how it can be interpreted in a certain way based on critical knowledge of the Bible verses reading it literally. Helen (60, Judaism) expressed a similar strained relationship with the Torah. She said

I covered every page from the Five Books of Moses with transparent parchment, and, with a pink marker, I highlighted over words of misogyny and vengeance, cruelty and militarism, words attributed to G-d, and I highlighted between words where a female presence is omitted. Whenever I read that ubiquitous phrase, "And the Lord said unto Moses," I looked long and hard because should we not be absolutely certain there is no misquote when someone (even Moses himself) quotes G-d? I called this action, "The Liberation of G-d." I spelled the word God with a G, a dash, and a D as I was taught in my religious upbringing, but the dash is now pink.

In this quote Helen explains her disagreements with the words of the Torah, and uses her own methods to create meaning and words so the Torah makes more sense to her. She creates a different relationship with the scripture that is more aligned with her beliefs.

Feminism

Along with exploring how the women interpreted religious texts, they were also asked about their interpretation of feminism. When I initially started this project, I had people ask me how I'm going to decide who is a feminist or not, and I decided that any woman's idea of feminism would work; I left the definition up to the participants themselves. All the participants had the same belief that feminism is about empowerment,

equality, fighting for what's right, and being who you are. Every woman also made a point to say that feminism is different for everybody, and they cannot judge a woman based on her idea of feminism. Here are a few of the ways the women described feminism:

Celestina (35 Christian) said that a feminist is: "An empowered woman who does her own thing, who isn't afraid to do what she wants. To take care of things on her own."

Apple (65, Christian) provided a similar definition and says feminism: "means having the opportunity and the strength to do anything you want to do. Without impediment and equally compensated."

The Muslim women tied feminism into their choices of wearing the hijab or not. The only Muslim woman who didn't wear it was Mo, and she explains why:

Personally it's one of those things, when you wear the scarf then it's a full commitment. My journey with the scarf has been continuously evolving and figuring out why I want to wear it. There's a whole discussion about modesty, and learning that modesty doesn't only mean a cloth over my head or the way I dress, or how I act or how I handle my relationships. My learning with my faith is still evolving. My personal belief is that a woman should have whatever right to do what she wants. If one person wants to wear it, power to you. That's the epitome of being a feminist. Everyone has every right to wear as much or as little as you want.

Regarding hijabs, Ann (Muslim) says:

I don't understand when women look at the hijab and say it's oppressive....but since when does you covering up make you less independent or less educated, or less free? I'm just keeping my beauty to myself and if someone likes me, like a friend or significant other, it's because they like me for me. My intelligence, my brain, not just my hair or my beauty. For me, I got more confidence as I wore it. I was already weird and different so why not be myself and say what I want and do what I want. Who cares. I'm doing this by myself, so I'll do everything by myself
Dee (19, Muslim) also had a similar definition:

It's kind of like saying "I'm going to wear what I want, I'm going to go outside." I've had people ask me why I'm not dressed more modestly, or ask me why I'm outside. But I just do and wear what I want. I'm going to be who I am. I don't care about what other countries do.

The Muslim women tied feminism into agency when it comes to wearing their hijabs. Anne, Mo, and Dee all explained that wearing the hijab is a personal choice, no one forced them to wear it. The quotes above from Anne and Dee show how they've integrated feminism into their choices of wearing the hijab. For them, wearing it is a source of pride and empowerment in who they are as Muslim women. Although Mo wasn't wearing it when I interviewed her, she explained that wearing it is her own personal journey and she wouldn't judge others for their own choices in wearing it. The hijab for Fae was different. Coming from Saudi Arabia, wearing the hijab is seen as different, almost deviant. Fae explains

Usually girls wear it when they start their period because it means they are grown. In SA, we cover everything except our eyes. But something changed, young girls now are wearing just the hijab. But older women are wearing the niqab [full cover].

Fae was wearing a hijab when I interviewed her, which shows a personal choice in wearing it, although I didn't ask if she would continue to wear it when she moves back to Saudi Arabia.

Mo's explanation of feminism touched on the broad yet intimate nature of feminism. She explains what feminism means to her but also starts to talk about how feminism can be difficult to grasp because of its nature of being personalized.

My theory is that we should all be feminists, but kind of learn what that means to each of us. Which can be hard because feminism is such a broad term and

everyone wants to associate with it, shouldn't there be standards we all adhere too? But because it is what it is...it's such a personal thing....for me, being a Muslim woman in all honesty, in its entirety, is owning every part of me. Understanding that my relationships with God is what's most important.

These quotes focus more on individual ideas of feminism. The belief that they are strong and have agency. This was a common theme when I asked the women about what feminism means to them. But it was also common for the women to talk about feminism in relation to society, that they deserve to be treated equally no matter what. When they say they are feminists, they also believe that equality is important and mandatory. They were all aware of injustices that women face, and they all explained that they understand their feminism may be different from someone else's.

Other women defined feminism in ways that both included self-control and empowerment, but also talked about the larger world. An example of this is the account Shifra gives of her Jewish feminism on Jewish Women's Archives. Her description of her feminism is more than just feminism, is about her entire Jewish identity. She goes on to explain how she feels Jewish feminism has not only affected her life but affected the world around her as well.

Jewish feminism was more complicated for me. Jewish feminism always seemed more laborious and more constricting. And yet, at the same time, my commitment to Jewish feminism was a powerful calling that kept me returning again and again to my communal roots. I lived in two parallel universes. As a feminist I expanded my consciousness. As a counterculture Jewish activist and Jewish feminist, I explored within, to discover my identity as a Jewish woman. My feminism went wide; my Jewish feminism went deep. Sometimes these roles have been in conflict. Sometimes they have converged. Often I feel confident that feminism has *truly* changed the world – remaking the family, reshaping the relationships between men and women, expanding our notions of leadership, challenging the assumption that status derives from wealth and work, and opening every single field to women's influence. Other times, I feel the weariness that comes from

seeing the dirt under our fingernails as we labor to make some small plants grow in a garden that seems so far from Eden, where our huge efforts seem so disproportionate to our modest outcomes. (Jewish Women's Archive)

While earlier in this paper I discussed how feminisms differ around the world, the women in my study all had the same general understanding and explanation of feminism. Feminism to them was about owning themselves, being strong and independent, and being the best person they could be in the eyes of their religion. Although the women grew up in different eras of feminism, they still had the same beliefs regarding feminism. Now, the younger women are facing different challenges than the older women, but there is still a fight within them all, and they all were very vocal and passionate about wanting equality for everyone.

Life Choices

The main questions I asked the women were how they used their religious and feminist views to aid them in making major life choices. The choices I asked about were choosing a life partner, choosing a career/education, raising children if they had them or wanted them, and reproductive health choices. I chose to ask about these choices because they are choices everyone makes within their lives. So how do women who share religious and feminist beliefs make these choices? I wondered if they used religion or feminism more in helping them make these choices.

Marriage

Apple (65, Christian, white), LuLu (74, Christian, white), Patty (37, Christian, Chinese), Celestina (34, Christian, white), Hana (64, Jewish, white) and Fae (27, Muslim, Saudi) were the married women in my study. They all stated that their partner's faith and level of spirituality was important to them. When I asked Apple (65 Christian) about how she used her religiosity and feminist beliefs to help her choose a partner, she said:

Oh that's easy. Spirituality. People who were open to that, because I always knew I was a spiritual person. As a feminist I can't go with love or romance, I was sucked into that with another guy, but I realized that it was lust that leaves and you're not gonna build anything. So I had to find someone that I'd want to sit with, whose willing to go to church, willing to explore India, someone to play chess with, who will support your career, so the only reason I took his name was because my father was a superintendent of LA county and I'm going into the same field, so I decided to get rid of my fathers name and start a new life."

The non-married women expressed the same thoughts about choosing their partners. To them it was less about romance or physical attraction, and more about spirituality and being able to share it with each other. They felt that having a religious bond was stronger than any physical bond. Patty (37 Christian) and Hana (64 Judaism) said they had some tensions with partners who were not initially as religious as they were, but they were able to compromise and create a special religious bond between themselves and their partners that is still growing. Of the women who were not married, they all stated that faith is going to be a major contributing factor in their decision making process, one that will not be compromised on easily. The Muslim women all stated that they want to marry a Muslim man.

Raising children

Fae (27, Muslim, Saudi), Star (69, Christian, white), Lulu (65, Christian, white) and Celestine (34, Christian, white) were the only women who had children. They all said

that raising them with religious and feminist beliefs was important to them and just happened naturally. They said there was never a time when they had to stop and think, or question how they were raising their children. There were no tensions or issues they had faced with their children, and no disagreements with their partners on how to raise their children. When I asked Mo (23 Muslim), Dee (19 Muslim), and Anne (21 Muslim) about how they would raise future children, they all said they were going to make sure their children were treated fairly. They all stated that before marrying someone, they want to know that the way they raise their children will match with their partner's ideas as well. While choosing a life partner is a major life choice, so is deciding on a career. I then asked the women about their career choices and asked about their education.

Careers and education

Ten of the 11 women I interviewed either had a college education or were working on their first degree. The only exception was the woman from Saudi Arabia, she is currently not working outside the home, rather she stays at home and raises her daughter. All of the women stated that choosing their career was never an issue of debate or a struggle with their religious and feminist beliefs. Six of the eleven women I interviewed were teachers at some point, or still are teachers. Six of the Christian women interviewed were some form of teacher, with specialties in elementary/special education, zoology, elementary science, German/Spanish, Christian education, or theology. When asked why they decided to become teachers, they all stated that teaching was what they were meant to do with their lives.

Fae, the Muslim woman who is currently not working outside the home, was an elementary school teacher in Saudi Arabia. The other 3 Muslim women were working on degrees in business management/merchandise marketing, wildlife, criminology and justice studies and Critical Race Gender and Sexuality Studies.

Celestina (Christian, 35) had started as a science major and received a BA in Biology; she then chose to study religion for her Masters. She graduated with a Masters in Theology. When I asked her how she went from studying science to studying religion she said:

I went with the study of life and in some ways creation so then I figured I'd study the Creator. There are documents in Catholicism, one written by Jon Paul II that says faith and reason don't necessarily conflict and to some extent, thinking that evolution happened doesn't exactly negate a creator. And Catholicism doesn't really look at genesis as a literal work... it's helpful to have both.

The other 2 science teachers had similar views - they felt that there shouldn't be divide between science and faith and they were able to easily mesh their love of science and religion together

Reproductive health

I asked all of the women about their opinions of reproductive health and access to it. Every woman, across all religious identifications, was supportive of women's rights to reproductive health, and had much to say about our current political climate and the fear that reproductive rights may be taken away soon. Celestina (Christian, 35) had the most to say about reproductive rights. While she said she is pro-life, she states that holistic reproductive health and education is as important as clinical health. Celestina also said:

And people talk about this pro-life thing...it's not just about giving birth to the child, it's about taking care of the child too. We need to be more sensitive to what mothers need and the needs of the children. It doesn't end with having the baby. I'm a natural family planning teacher, it's an empowering thing for women to know the rhythms of their bodies. I think it's empowering to know what our natural bodies do. I also see it as a good thing for the relationship.

I also asked the women about menstruation, their experiences learning about it, and attitudes towards it within their faith and family. I asked the women what their religious texts said about menstruation and how they were taught about menstruation from their families. All the women had positive attitudes and experiences when learning and dealing with menstruation. None of them had an experience of it being perceived as "dirty" or "gross." Muslim women had a specific relationship with menstruation and Islam. All of the Muslim women explained that when a woman starts menstruating, that is when she can start wearing the hijab, if she so chooses. They say the hijab is a symbol for womanhood, maturity, and responsibility. The women also explained how menstruation can have an effect on their religious practices, such as praying. When they are menstruating, women don't have to pray. Also during Ramadan, which is a normal fasting period for the faithful, the women who are menstruating don't have to fast, instead they keep their eating hidden from the men.

The women I interviewed had various lifestyles, relationships, religious beliefs and goals for their lives. I asked them about these major choices because these choices not only were guided by their religious/feminist beliefs, but these choices also affect other identities as well. If they decide on marriage or having children, they become wives and mothers. As we see from the interviews, those who decided to become wives and

mother's wanted to do so with someone who shares the same beliefs as they do. This choice makes sense, as the relationships they build can only flourish more when beliefs are shared. Sometimes the women made choices that challenged their beliefs, such as marrying a non-religious partner, but they still decided to choose that partner because they shared similar feminist beliefs, which is just as important. When asking them about the choices they made throughout their lives, they already knew what they wanted and were working towards it. Very rarely did the women share instances when they came to a crossroads between their religious and feminist beliefs. They did however share stories of moments in their lives when their religious and feminist beliefs collided. These tense interactions were at the most, very difficult points or decisions in their lives, and at the very least, an annoying conversation with someone else. But every woman had a story to share.

Tense Interactions

Family

Every woman had a story to share when it came to tensions they experienced with people in their lives that challenged their religious and feminist beliefs. For all of the Muslim women tensions arose from interactions they had with someone in their extended family in the Middle East. Mo (23), Dee (19) and Anne (21) all grew up in liberal Muslim families, so tensions would arise when they would visit with their more conservative relatives. Issues of how males in their families were treated compared to the

females was commonly discussed, they noticed that men were offered more leniency than women, and the women all questioned it and brought it up to their families at some point.

Dee (19) said

You look at the Middle Eastern cultures and women stay home. Women don't go out, they clean, take care of children and cook. The guys will say she never leaves the house, that's just what they do. And that bothered me so much, and I always questioned it. Why can't they work? Why do they have to stay home? It's frustrating. The guys can do whatever they want, it's known that they will get into trouble and date and do drugs and all kinds of things. The girl does anything and she's in major trouble. You look at so many different things and you think "how is that okay?"

While this is a quote from a single Muslim woman, the other Muslim women expressed similar thoughts. This quote explains the gender segregation that the Muslim women see in their families overseas, and the segregation is not just in the home. Dee and Fae both talked about segregation within mosques as well. They explained to me that men and women do not pray together in mosques. Dee said "the mosque back home has 2 different rooms, 2 entrances. One mosque we used to go to had women upstairs, and another one had women in the back. Sometimes they'll pray outside." Fae explained that in Saudi Arabia, women pray at home and men pray at the mosque. If women do go to mosque, they have their own separate building. The only time men and women pray together (in Saudi Arabia) is during Ramadan. I asked both Dee and Fae what they think would happen if women started praying next to men in the mosques, and they both said "It just wouldn't happen." It was interesting to see the women openly question segregation within their families who live in the Middle East and their disagreements

with it, but when it comes to segregation of religious practices such as praying, there was no questioning of it at all, just an acceptance that desegregation wouldn't happen.

They all also mentioned that they understood that there were cultural differences between them and their families that live overseas. After stating their own beliefs, they ultimately decided that they couldn't change their family's minds, and left it alone. But they still hold their feminist beliefs and state that when they have their own families, they will be sure to teach them equality.

Fae (27 Muslim) was the only Muslim women with a child and expressed some concern with her family and raising her daughter. Fae is from Saudi Arabia, where gender segregation is still practiced in many ways, for instance men and women only speak to each other if they know each other already. Men and women who are strangers do not speak to one another, nor do they have classes together, nor go to the mosque together. Fae (27 Muslim) mentioned that she and her husband (who also identifies as a feminist) will teach their daughter equality, and the difficulty only comes from when they return to Saudi Arabia and bring their daughter around their families given how their families embody gendered beliefs. While she didn't go into much detail about her family, she talked more about Saudi Arabia in general, and said she's starting to see more feminist ideals in social media. Fae (27) said

I think her dad will teach [her] about feminism. It'll be very different when [she] grows up, I don't know if me or her father will have to teach her much. I see big changes coming in the future.

Fae says that feminism has been spreading more in Saudi Arabia, and I speculate that she hopes with the spread of feminism, that maybe there won't be so much tension

between the way she chooses to raise her daughter and the way her family feels she should.

Two of the women faced issues with their families and the people they decided to marry and share their life with. Patty (37 Christian, Chinese) and Hana (64 Jewish, White) shared stories about tensions between themselves and their romantic partners and families. While they grew up in egalitarian families, they also grew up in religious families. Patty and Hana's stories are similar in that they both chose romantic partners who were not religious, but shared similar feminist beliefs. Patty and Hana both said that it was difficult at first, because they are both very religious and having a religious partner was important for them. For Patty, the tension came mostly with her family.

In my family everyone married someone of a shared faith, and we all agreed that that's a really essential component to a marriage with a capital M, it's a big deal. And I dated Christian boys, I've dated non-Christian people. But I knew that to marry someone because my faith was such a large component of my life that I felt that was essential. I needed to share that with someone. I ended up dating my husband and he didn't have a shared faith, and that was a source of conversation for us. I knew that we shared so many other values and his sense of social justice, equality, desire for change in the world and all these things....we really shared and I felt like based on my faith, they stemmed out of something else. So for us it was developing language to know...for him to know of my world and experience and fears...We had a long engagement in part because of our family, so it was really important to me that they came along before we got married. So we had time to sit and discuss. And I think they have changed their views. I just felt like it was a "whose in and whose out" and it really shaped and influenced my family through that journey of me feeling disobedient and feel like I'm rebelling in a way that I didn't intend to.

Patty then explained that she and her husband found a church that worked for both of them, it was a different denomination for her but accessible enough for him and since they've started attending that church, her husband has become a more religious person

and has become more accepting of religion in general. Patty's family has also become more accepting of her partner. Patty and her husband both compromised and came to an agreement that ultimately brought together their feminist beliefs, religious practices and families together.

Hana married a non-religious, and non-Jewish woman. When talking about her family's acceptance to her partner, Hana said

My maternal grandmother who was still a little religious, she was the one person who was an immigrant from Eastern Europe. When I told her that I had fallen in love and found the right person, her first question was "Is she Jewish?" Backtrack to Torah and homosexuality, nowhere does it address lesbians. Not even a mention, even in the Talmud. Nobody in my family appeared to be uncomfortable with it. When we had one of our first wedding ceremonies, and my father didn't come and that really hurt. It's not that he wasn't okay with it, because he said he was.... he didn't come to any of them. And I don't know why. In 1984, there wasn't a lot of [Rabbi's] out there, so we didn't have a Rabbi to marry us for a while. The only Rabbi in Humboldt County at that point was conservative so I don't think he would have done it. If he was alive now, he might have.

While Hana said that her family seemed accepting of her decision, it seemed to still bother her that her father didn't show up to her multiple weddings. I wanted to ask more questions about her father, but I didn't want to push too far. Instead I asked about having a wife who was culturally non-Jewish, and how that had an effect on their marriage. Hana said

My wife is not religious, but she comes to services but she...doesn't like all the rules and won't do them. And it still upsets her after all these years that I won't eat shellfish. But if I were to say I'm not eating meat and milk, she would just....it would be too hard, one thing too many. So another higher Jewish value is called shalom bayit (peace in the home), and so I decided, yes I can try to pay attention to what the sages say even though I don't agree, but I have to keep peace in my home and that's a higher priority. So I don't do that to her.

For Hana, keeping peace in her home is strong Jewish value, and she is willing to break a few Jewish rules in order to respect that value. This compromising of her religious tradition with her marriage is just one way she chose to integrate and balance her religious and feminist beliefs.

Careers

Only a few women shared stories of tensions at their workplace. Mo was the only Muslim woman who shared a story, while Star and Celestina (the 2 Christian woman who worked in their churches) were the only other women to shares stories as well. For Mo (23 Muslim) specifically, one interaction stood out to her in relation to her career. She works in the fashion industry as a model and designer. She often collaborates with fashion designers to do photoshoots and blog posts about updated plus sized women's fashion.

Sometimes brands will want to collaborate with me, and there was one during the summer that wanted to do something... they asked me to do swimsuits. In my own personal preference and religion, when I do go swimming, I'm in shorts and a t shirt. Shorts are to my knees, that's how I grew up. So I had an instant where I had to think "I don't want to say no because it's good business, I don't want the brand to hate me" I'm particular to my brand and my values behind my brand. So there was a moment of question....a moment where I felt my faith would hold me back in this instance. I ended up asking them if I could pass this opportunity simply for personal reasons. I didn't need to mention my faith. I was afraid they weren't going to want to work with me, but instead they offered if I'd like to work with other types of summer clothes instead, so I said sure.

While this could become a common occurrence for Mo in her industry, this first time dealing with it was a moment that Mo didn't expect to have to face. Mo was the one woman who does not wear a Hijab, and she mentioned previously that her relationship with the hijab is always changing, so when she is working, collaborators and other

businesses do not know she is Muslim unless she has specifically told them. She handled the situation in a way that she was comfortable with, still holding her religious beliefs close to her, while also keeping her faith to herself. She knows that she won't compromise her religious beliefs for her career. She later states:

I've never been a person who did something that wasn't her, so now I won't work with a brand I don't feel connected with. When I go to shoots, I'll tell them I don't reveal my arms, legs, or chest and they are going to have to be okay with that. More than anything, those are my standards and I have to keep those wherever I go no matter what.

This is an example of a religious feminist woman having to actively integrate her religious and feminist beliefs into her everyday life. This is also a case of her having to navigate both parts of her identity, while she is working and being independent, she also needs to keep true to her faith and be comfortable doing both. Mo successfully used her own agency and stayed true to her faith by explaining that she wasn't comfortable with wearing swimsuits because of her personal code of modesty. She didn't explain if this has happened to her multiple times in her career but I can speculate that because she is a fashion model, a similar situation may arise. But now she knows how she will react and answer to such a situation.

Celestina works full time at her church, dealing with general operational duties. She also gives sermons and runs the women's group. She stated that she is recognized as an important figure in her church. She explained:

I've talked to some Protestants and they're surprised to see a woman leader within the church and that always seemed strange. I'm not just leading the women's group, I sometimes stand in front of the entire church and lead discussion, I'm no authority but I am a figure...yeah, they hear me speak, I'm not just taking care of the alter or ironing the linens....which I do [that as well] but (laughs) that's not

the only thing I do. There's just no one else here to do it... I've had men not listen to me in church or go to the priest first for verification even though I know what I'm talking about. I did have an interaction with a priest from India, and I don't know if it's just cultural differences or not...but he was yelling at me and I was yelling back....he had issues with my bookkeeping. It was honestly very silly.

Celestina recognizes that she holds an important role in the church, if it was not for her, many of the church duties would not be fulfilled. Yet she explains that some men take that for granted, even though she's proven that she is a figure at her church. Overall she states that interactions like these don't happen on a daily basis, but she has definitely noticed when they do happen and she recognizes her worth at her church.

Star (69 white) is a local Pastor and shared a few instances of people challenging her for her career choice.

I was asked to do a funeral. The woman was burying her much older spouse and the best friend of the husband said "No, a woman can't do this, this is my friend". And from the time I was 30 to well into my 40's, at least half the weddings I did, some wedding guests...often a young man would come up to me and say "You're not supposed to be a Pastor, it says in the scripture that women can't do this or that".....but they were so sure. They felt the need to tell me despite my reaction. I think the men in that generation felt genuinely rocked and threatened.

Mo, Celestina, and Star all faced difficult moments in their careers, and while most people find difficulty in their work, rarely can people openly talk about how these difficulties challenged their closely held belief systems. Moe, Celestina, and Star all continue to do the work they are passionate about despite these interactions with people who challenged them, whether it was intentional or not. These women show their strength in themselves, their feminism and their religions by continuing to do what they love and navigate seamlessly through these interactions.

Religious peers

LuLu (74, Christian, white), Redd (68, Christian, white) Star (69, white) and Celestina (35, Christian, white) shared stories of tensions with religious peers within their churches. LuLu, Star, and Celestina shared stories of men making remarks about how women should behave in church or in general, or discounting things women would say within church.

Redd's story was about her general distaste for the culture of a church she used to attend. She explains why she didn't continue going to her last church:

I went to the church, I won't name it. It was all about being born into sin, babies are born into sin. Women should be submissive, this church was packed to the gills. And I thought "what the hell is this about?"I thought it was hypocritical because people would go to church and hear the message then live a totally different life during the week and I found them to be gossipy and back-biting.

Lulu (74) shared some experiences she had at one specific church that she doesn't attend anymore:

One church we went to had a pastor with an outspoken wife and people were critical of that. Then I became the choir director, and the pastor started saying that no one listens to the words of the choir anyway. The man who was in charge of the church council discounted anything a woman would say. One of the women in the choir had a husband who would not permit her to play her saxophone in church because it was too sexy. Does that not strike you as idiotic?

After having these experiences, Redd and LuLu actively chose to find churches that were more accepting of them and their contributions, and had more inclusive sermons. They ended up attending the same church in Humboldt County, where they feel the most at home now.

Star (69 white) had one story in particular from her church that stood out. She shared her journey of having a son with no father figure in his life, and how many in her church were not accepting of it.

I got ordained in 81 and he [Star's boyfriend] came....but once I was an ordained minister, it was like....he couldn't picture himself as the pastor's spouse. He grew up Lutheran. He was used to male pastors. It just....it didn't work for him. So shortly after that he started dating other people. So that's when I said to myself that it's okay if I never get married. But it's not okay with me not to be a mom. So I started exploring artificial insemination. And that's how I got pregnant a few years later, my son was born in 83. And that was a crisis in my church. Some people had never heard of such a thing, some people didn't believe it, they thought I made it up. Those attitudes were getting shut down quickly after explaining everything. But there was some whispering. But the pastor and his wife and her friend, the most influential people in the church were very supportive. Two of the male leaders in the church who were considered fairly conservative, one was a dentist and one of his clients did the same. He saw the little girl and he thought it was really cool and stuff. The other guy was a rancher and he said "pffftt artificial insemination, we do that all the time". So when his wife said to him "but it's different!" he said uhhh actually no. we give blood, what's the difference.

The women who told these stories don't go to the churches mentioned anymore. Since then, they've found churches where interactions like these don't happen as often. They've made sure to find churches where they feel comfortable and welcomed.

While every woman had a story to share about a difficult time in their life when they had to question themselves or their choices, every single women made a choice. They chose to still hold their beliefs close to them without compromising them. While some compromised on specific actions or places, they were still able to work out the difficulty in a way that works for them and allows them to still practice their religious and feminist ideals.

DISCUSSION

I admit that when I first decided to do this study, I was under the impression that all religions are patriarchal and oppressive in some way towards women. I had no prior knowledge of many of the practices and beliefs in each of the Abrahamic religions, but I've come to learn that my opinions and ideas of each were all Western based and inaccurate. It is a grave mistake to assume that religious women are only "going along" with their religion, that they are pawns, blissfully ignorant, or actively choosing an oppressive lifestyle. It is also harmful to assume that religion and feminism simply don't mix. Although the three Abrahamic religions may differ in some ways, they all are very old religions, written in times when roles and expectations of genders were strictly adhered to. The writings of these religions haven't changed too much, but cultures have, and we are starting to see differences being played out between cultures and religion. Some tensions arise as interpretations of texts becomes more broad and more fitting to modern day culture, which has caused secular and religious people alike to re-think and start to interpret religious writings in ways that are subjective to each religious person.

I had some expectations and assumptions before starting this research. I was anticipating hearing more stories of women coming from conservative religious families, and having a sort of "coming out" moment when discussing feminism with their families. However, ten out of the 11 women I interviewed said they came from liberal families where egalitarian ideals were naturally expressed. There was no need to fight for their

voice, or the ability to get educated or go to work. I also expected to hear of more tensions arising from people within the women's peer groups and the women themselves in regards to their feminism. Every woman shared at least one story of a disagreement or a tense interaction with someone in their life in regards to who they are as religious feminist women. These interactions consisted of tense interactions in religious institution, disagreements with family members, or with fellow religious peers. While the women tended to only share a story or two about the conflicts they faced, they never specifically stated if it was a recurring theme in their life or not.

I analyzed the women's different standpoints as religious feminist women. I chose to explore standpoints because standpoints provide people with a specific type of knowledge about the world around them, based on their experiences and how they chose to identify themselves. I wanted to explore how standpoints differ based on religious beliefs and affiliation. I also wanted to see how standpoints may differ between women of different races, ages, classes and ideas of feminism. Looking at standpoints is important to my study and other studies of religious people because everyone will have different reasons for being religious, for how they practice their religion, and how they see the world based on their religion. Standpoint theory also ties into the concept of "lived religion" (Ammerman 2014), which is the exploration and study of the everyday lives of religious people. Lived religion is seen throughout my study, I ask women about interactions they have with people and their religion, interactions that are very common in their lives. Based on my data, Christian women have a different standpoint than

Muslim and Jewish women. Christian women in the US practice the dominant religion and see their religious beliefs reaffirmed within government practices, recited during national anthems, and celebrated during national holidays. Jewish and Muslim women are minorities in the US. According to the literature, the US media claims Muslim women are oppressed and forced into covering her hair by her religion and men. In reality wearing the hijab is just as much of a choice as a woman's hair color. Additionally, older women have different standpoints than younger women. The Christian and Jewish women I interviewed were all over the age of 35, and have experienced a different feminist narrative than the Muslim women who are all in their 20's. For instance, the older feminist women's idea of feminism didn't focus much on multiculturalism or racial justice, but more on personal independence for themselves. The Muslim women didn't openly talking about multicultural feminism, but they did talk about how their ideas of feminism are connected to their religion, whereas the Christian/Jewish women did not connect religion and feminism as much.

I analyzed how being a Muslim woman in the US can be difficult in a predominantly Christian society. The Muslim women's standpoints as religious women was vastly different than the Christian women. The Muslim women I interviewed understood that being a Muslim woman in our country after 9/11 comes with its own specific struggles, struggles that older, white Christian women will never understand. The Muslim women's understanding of U.S. culture is different than most of the Christian/Jewish women because the Muslim women's parents are all immigrants. These women demonstrated an acceptance of US culture because they grew up in the US, but

they also understood other cultures as well. The Muslim women discuss this when they talk about their choices of wearing the hijab, or when they specifically need to explain to me that the culture of the countries their parents came from does not reflect the religious beliefs they have. I shared quotes of the young Muslims talking about openly being who they are, practicing their religion because it's what they want, not because their society tells them too. They also discussed how wearing their hijab for them is a sign of their feminism, and that wearing the hijab and being a Muslim is a source of pride for the Muslim women, despite comments they may receive from non-Muslims or the strange looks that may come their way. Collins and Smiths (1990) writings about standpoint theory aimed to explore how people view the world around them based on their specific place in the world, their experiences and their identities. In my study I found that while religious women have specific standpoints in their own way, so do women of different ages, races, and family origins.

Throughout this process of analysis, I struggled with using intersectionality because I was hoping to have a more diverse group of women to analyze. Instead the demographics of women I interviewed were homogenous; all the Christian/Jewish women were over 35 and 5 of the 6 women were white, and the Muslim women all had families from the Middle East, and were in their 20's. Therefore, looking into how their identities intersected proved difficult to deeply analyze. I originally wanted to use intersectionality to analyze how women of different religions may be oppressed by their religion, since intersectionality is mainly used to analyze the disadvantages and oppressions people face based on the multiple identities they have. I've come to learn that

by doing so, I assumed that ALL women feel oppressed by their religions, which is just not true. This idea that women are oppressed by their religion conflicted with the literature I found, especially the work on Jewish and Islamic feminism (Abu-Lughod 2002, Ali 2008, Irshai 2008, Vanzan 2012, Yanay-Ventura 2016, Zobair 2015). Their work explained that Muslim and Jewish women, especially from outside of the US, have created feminisms that have been integrated into their religions and societies. The feminisms developed in other countries are similar with the US because of the acceptance of equality, but varies in the way they are practiced, based on the region. Literature describing feminisms around the world also conflicted with literature that stated that religion is dangerous for women (Magee 1995, McDonough 1977, Ostriker and Suskin 2011, Prickett 2015, Radford Ruether 1993). My study actively challenges the notion that religion is always harmful to women. Instead, my study shows that women don't always feel oppressed by their religion, and that while there are aspects of their own religions that some women may not agree with, it is not enough for them to leave their faith behind entirely.

Referring back to Singh (2015), I think it would be wise for researchers in the future to analyze and use intersectionality as a tool for analyzing liberation instead of oppression, especially in regards to religious women. What I found in my analysis was that women were empowered by their religions, more so than they felt oppressed by them. While I originally wanted to focus on the difficulties of religious feminist women, I ended up learning just as much about the ways in which religious feminist women have positive relationships with their religions. My findings show Blumer's (1986) structural

symbolic interactionism at work, as the women were socialized to become religious feminist women. Ten of the eleven women were raised in liberal, egalitarian families. They were introduced to the basics of feminism early on, while also being raised in religious families. There was never any question of their identities because their identities have been reaffirmed constantly throughout their lives. They had practiced religion for much of their lives, building their own personal relationship to their religions and to God. Similar to literature by Beaman-Hall (1997), Harrison (2007) and Irshai (2008), the women in my study felt close to God and interpreted God and their religious texts in their own way. In a few instances, women read a verse and actively chose to create meaning of the text in a way that made more sense to them, or that followed their beliefs better. Some women actively changed pronouns during religious services or while reading scripture to themselves as a way of creating God into an entity that they can connect to. Overall, the relationships to their religions were very positive and important to all of the women. For every women I interviewed, religion was one of the most important aspects of her life, her master status was a religious feminist woman.

There are very few qualitative studies on religious feminist women's lives and experiences (Aune 2011 and 2014, Saba Rasheed 2008). While these studies are great examples of qualitative work on religious and feminist women, they focus on the relationships between religious feminist women and religion as an institution. I found no literature that studies religious feminist women's interactions with other people in her life. In my study, I found that the interactions religious feminist women had with some others were a source of tension in her life. These interactions sometimes challenged their

identities. They would have interactions with religious people that would challenge their feminist beliefs. Some interactions were with their religious families, their religious peers, or co-workers. These interactions were not with strangers, in fact very rarely was a negative interaction with a stranger. Through every interaction, the women had to make a choice as to how she would react, and every time she continued to reaffirm that she was a religious woman with feminist beliefs. There was never an instance where the women compromised on losing any part of her identity.

Stets and Burke's identity theory (2000) states that we categorize and place roles on ourselves based on the identities we have. We create expectations and meanings to these roles, which in turn guide our behaviors. All the stories shared were instances of the women's multiple identities converging and coming into conflict. Sometimes their words were challenged, sometimes their identity as a woman working in a specific field was challenged. Sometimes their choices were challenged. The women all have a strong understanding of who they are as religious feminist women, since they've had these identities for most of their lives. Sometimes other identities would come into play, such as being an unwed mother, a busy mother, a religious leader, a daughter, a student, or a teacher. I asked the women how their religious feminist identity had an impact on their life choices, and therefore other identities they have. All of the women were able to easily merge all of their identities together, but their religious and feminist identities had the most impact on the choices they make throughout their lives. The women all shared that when getting married and having children, a partner with similar values is very important, and they will actively raise their children with the same religious feminist beliefs they

have. The level of agency used by the women in my study was different than the literature provided by Massoumi (2015), Rinaldo (2014 and 2008) Zion-Waldoks (2015). In Massoumi (2015), Rinaldo (2008, 2014) and Zion-Waldoks' (2015) work, respectively, religious women were actively fighting against a specific aspect of their religion, or a religious practice they disagreed with. They were activists and fighting back against religion as a structural institution. In my findings, the women used their agency on a micro-level, through their interactions and reactions to others. Their agency comes from the important choices they make throughout their lives, such as who they will marry, how they want to raise kids (if they even want kids), and where they will practice their faith. Other ways in which the women used agency on a micro-level was the way in which they decided to interpret verses they may have disagreed with, or how they chose to react to someone who challenged them. This use of agency in their everyday lives also ties into the concept of lived religion, as their agency is the women acting out their lived religion with the people around them.

Throughout this paper, I've discussed the binary between secular feminism and religious studies. Based on the literature I found, some secular feminists claim that religion is harmful to women (Abu-Lughod 2002, Bedran 2005, Harrison 2007, Irashi 2008, Mikołajczak, Małgorzata. Pietrzak, Janina. 2014, Osman 2011, Ghada Nishat 2017, Rosemary, Radford Ruether 1982 & 1993, McDonough 1977) and even claim that religion isn't worth studying in the social sciences. My research demonstrates that feminism and religion can be integrated seamlessly in women's lives, and many women do it unconsciously or they make a point to integrate them. The women all made a point

to tell me that feminism and religion are very personal choices for everyone, and of course religion and feminism can be integrated together. This study shows that while there's literature on how religious women use agency to change aspects of their macro-social and religious lives (Beaman-Hall 1997, Bodo 2015, Hallum 2013, Irshai 2008, Mack-Canty 2004, Massoumi 2006, 2016, Rinaldo 2014, Salem 2013, Singh 2015, Valkonen 2016, Vanza 2012, Weber 2015, Yanaya-Ventura 2016, Zion-Waldoks 2015), religious women's agency is also used in the interactions in their everyday lives. My study is one of the very few studies that analyzes these interactions and I call for future research on these interactions. My research also shows the importance of studying different standpoints in regards to religion and feminism. If scholars don't agree with how someone performs their religion or feminism, is no reason to completely discount those experiences. I also call for this research to be a catalyst for more studies that use intersectionality to study liberation. Liberation, positive interpretations and experiences are just as important to focus on and explore as the oppression and negative experiences of people.

I'm also using this study as a call for future research on feminism and religion. It is time for scholars in social studies fields to realize that religion can be harmful sometimes, but religion is also beneficial to many people. Religion gives people faith and answers, it brings people together, and it has been used in many ways to shape society for the better, just like feminism. The secular/religion binary that has been created in academia needs to be severed, transformed, and integrated into one unit. Because in order to study humans and the social structures we are a part of, we need to be open to the

structures of which we are a part. We have to listen, understand, and open ourselves up to others who follow different paths in life, for it is there that we develop true empathy and knowledge.

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