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Author(s): Elizabeth Weiss Ozorak
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The Power, but not the Glory: How Women Empower Themselves Through Religion*

ELIZABETH WEISS OZORAK†

Women of all ages typically outscore men on most measures of religiousness (e.g., Benson 1991). However, most religious systems are patriarchal in belief and practice, and, as such, could be inhospitable to women. To explore this apparent paradox, sixty-one women between the ages of 18 and 71 were interviewed about their past and present religious beliefs and practices, and how these affected the way they felt about themselves. If their beliefs or practices had changed, they were asked what they felt had contributed to those changes. Open-ended questions and a relaxed format were used to encourage in-depth responses that might reflect each woman's personal perspective. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed for perceptions of religious inequality, coping strategies, and themes of relationship vs. individuation (Gilligan 1982). Most of the women did perceive inequality but coped with it by cognitive restructuring. Themes of relationship were far more prevalent than themes of individuation, suggesting that women are willing to cope with inequality in part because it is peripheral to their faith experience.

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in religion represents a paradox. Females of all ages are more religious than males (see Cornwall 1989 for a summary), and recent studies suggest that the gap may actually widen during midlife (Benson 1991). Women are more likely than men to describe themselves as religious, to be church-affiliated, to pray frequently, to feel close to God, and to report a positive view of their church (de Vaus and McAllister 1987; Cornwall 1989; Felty and Poloma 1991). However, many religions are patriarchal in their beliefs, sacred images, language, and practices. Why do women disproportionately invest in an institution that systematically devalues them?

There are many potential rewards for religious faith: comfort, security, a sense of belonging, and/or personal growth (Spilka, Hood, and Gorsuch 1985). The positive feelings associated with each of these gains would likely help the religious individual to feel somewhat better about herself or himself. On the other hand, if, as Carol Rayburn (1992:7) asserts, prejudice against girls and women is "within the very fiber of the religious establishment," it is hard to imagine how women could be empowered through participation in it. Rayburn further argues that masculine religious concepts preclude women's full acceptance in religious contexts and, on a more personal level, deprive women of the "special joy" of praying to someone like themselves, "something that men do all of the time and take for granted" (1987:141).

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† *Elizabeth Weiss Ozorak is an associate professor of psychology at Allegheny College, Meadville, PA 16335.*

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Research literature hints at support for Rayburn's contention that active religious participation may hamper women's initiative. A number of studies have found that devoutness is associated with gender-role stereotyping (Morgan and Scanzoni 1987), lower levels of motivation (Chusmir and Koberg 1988), diminished interest in career as opposed to family (Jones and McNamara 1991), and social inequality (Dhruvarajan 1990) — for women but not for men. Conversely, in one study (Weiss 1987), Hare Krishna men scored higher on sense of well-being than did men from the general population, not so for the Hare Krishna women. Sorscher (1992) studied Jews' identification with Jewish role models and found that women were six times as likely as men to identify themselves with victims; men identified themselves with intellectuals twice as often and with leaders four times as often. One woman lamented, "Not much of a choice of women to identify with" (22).

Since men are not similarly excluded or devalued by religion, it seems likely that their experience of religion will be different from that of women. Recent work suggests that women and men do experience God and faith differently. For women, the emphasis commonly seems to be on personal relationships with a loving God and with others in the religious community (e.g., Anderson and Hopkins 1991; Davidman 1991; Lawrence 1992; Sered 1987), while men are more likely to focus on God's power and judgment, and on their own spiritual discipline (Lawrence 1992; Nelson, Cheek, and Au 1985; Sered 1987). These distinctions are reminiscent of the two voices of morality contrasted by Gilligan (1982), often called the *voice of relationship* and the *voice of individuation.*

Gilligan's fundamental argument is that women, perhaps because of their social roles as caregivers and nurturers, define themselves in the context of their relationships and evaluate themselves and others on the basis of their ability to care for those who rely on them (Gilligan 1982). In contrast, men are socialized to value power and autonomy as well as abstract rules of fairness that are supposed to transcend context. Given these divergent paths, she contends, women and men develop different views of morality: women emphasize care and connection as the greatest moral good, while men emphasize independence and objectivity. Such differing conceptions of moral imperatives might well lead women to adopt images of God and perspectives on religion unlike those preferred by men. As Thompson (1991) points out, these may reflect gender orientation rather than biological sex. They may also reflect political status differences that happen, in this case, to be almost completely confounded with gender.

In general, people strive to maintain a positive self-concept, distorting their beliefs as necessary to do so (Tesser and Paulhus 1983). Girls — at least, daughters of the middle class — are now encouraged to see themselves as equal to men, as fundamentally independent from men and as worthy of men's respect (Sidel 1990). As women come to expect more equal treatment on a wide range of social situations, the roles and images offered to them by their religions may seem increasingly at odds with the positive self-image in which they are educated. That disparity must surely be painful. Aronson (1969) and others have demonstrated that individuals avoid the painful cognitive dissonance that arises from incompatible beliefs usually by adjusting one of the beliefs in a self-protecting way. The obvious solution here would be to abandon religion and its unappealing strictures upon women, and, of course, some women do. But a remarkable number do not. To what extent do women accept self-abnegation as the price of religion? If they do not accept it, what coping strategies allow them to reconcile their self-respect as women with the gender inequities they encounter in religion?

When individuals encounter information that suggests potential threat or conflict, they must process that information and formulate a response that allows them to preserve a sense of self-efficacy (for example, the presence of an emergency forces bystanders to decide whether or not to help; see Latané and Darley 1970). The model I propose, like Latané and Darley's, follows the normal sequence of cognitive information processing. Attention is in-

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evitably selection; what is perceived must then be interpreted, and the individual decides how to proceed on the basis of the interpretation that has been made.

The model predicts a set of responses that a woman might make to a patriarchal religion. In order for the woman to confront discrimination, she must first perceive it. If she perceives no inequities between the sexes, she will deny that such inequities exist (whether or not they actually exist is, for the purposes of this model, a separate issue). If she perceives inequities (such as the exclusion of women from the altar or from various roles in the church), she may accept them as appropriate, (for example, because of men's and women's different natures), or she may identify some or all of them as unfair. If she feels that they are unfair, she may cope by rejecting the religious establishment and its unflattering views of women (she may also leave for other reasons and thus escape the problem by default). Alternatively, to preserve her self-esteem within the religious context, she can cope in one of two ways: through behavior, by working to change the environment in which she participates; or cognitively, by altering her private response to the environment. I call these strategies *translation* and *interpretation,* respectively. A woman may use both kinds of strategy, and this I call *integration.* Note that only behavioral coping actually confronts the inequality as it exists in the environment; all of the other strategies are practiced upon the woman herself (even rejection does not require that the environment change, only that the woman leave it). As with any cognitive sequence, it is not necessary to be aware of a step in order to advance to the next (see Hill 1994).

Thompson (1991) and others (notably, Kwilecki 1988) have recognized the prevalence in religious research of simplified, functional definitions of religiousness or religious experience. The study described here is an attempt to address in a rich, contextually grounded way the distinctive nature of women's faith experience and the cognitive strategies they use to empower themselves within a religious framework, using the model described above and Gilligan's model of the voice of relationship (1982). Although this study is predominantly exploratory, it centers around three basic questions: (1) What are women's responses to the patriarchal aspects of their religions? (2) To what extent and in what ways are their responses similar to the responses found in other contexts of potential dissonance and internal conflict? (3) To what extent do these responses reflect an orientation toward relationship vs. individuation?

METHOD

Subjects

There are indications that low socioeconomic standing, low level of education, and racial minority status are associated with a sense of disempowerment and reduced self-esteem (Dukes and Martinez 1994; Gutierrez 1990; Ujjwala-Rani 1990), although the evidence is not fully consistent (e.g., Grubbs et al. 1992; Gecas and Seff 1990). Therefore, participants in this study were recruited from relatively privileged populations in order to maximize the likelihood that the women could have experienced the type of esteem-related dissonance described earlier. Sixty-one women between the ages of 18 and 71 participated in the study. Thirty were college students who were recruited through the campus mail, with a response rate of about 40%. Thirty-one adult women (15 in their thirties or forties and 16 in their fifties or older) were contacted through local churches: Catholic, United Methodist, and Unitarian Universalist, or through the Jewish Community Center. All but one of the women contacted by phone agreed to participate. The religious groups were chosen to provide a range of patriarchal structure, from highly patriarchal (Catholic) to minimally so (Unitarian Universalist). Two of the women were ministers and another was in training for ministry; several others had a minister in the family. Sixty-two percent were raised Protestant, 26%

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were raised Catholic, 8% were raised Jewish, and 4% were from other faith backgrounds. Thirty-three percent had since abandoned or changed their affiliation, but 85% were still sure that there is a God. The remaining 15% considered themselves agnostic. The level of religious activity ranged from nothing to highly active (regular worship attendance and participation in other religious activities), but most reported attending services at least a few times a month. All were white and most were middle-class, reflecting the composition of the congregations from which they were recruited. Three-quarters of the community women were currently married and all but three had children; the college women were all under 25, single and childless.

Procedure

The participants were interviewed individually, the college women by another woman student and the community women by the author, using a common list of open-ended questions. Each woman was asked about her past and present religious beliefs and practices and how these affected the way she felt about herself. If her beliefs or practices had changed, she was asked what had contributed to those changes. If she had not already spontaneously commented on gender issues, she was questioned about them toward the end of the interview: "Do you think your church (synagogue, etc.) treats men and women about equally, or not?" If the woman thought not, she was encouraged to explain. The interviews, which were audiotaped and then transcribed, ranged in length from approximately 20 minutes to nearly 3 hours, based on the extent to which each woman elaborated on her responses. All participants gave their permission to be quoted.

Coding

Responses to the question about the treatment of women vs. men were categorized according to the model described above; behavioral and cognitive coping strategies were then clustered by type of behavior (e.g., requesting that others use gender-inclusive language) or cognition (e.g., focusing on other aspects of the church or faith). A coding system based on Gilligan's moral voice of relationship and the contrasting voice of individuation (1982) was devised to classify recurrent themes in the interview protocols, which were then coded by two naive raters. Table 1 shows the themes as applied to a religious context.

To control for the differences in length of response, the quantitative coding was based on the relative presence or absence of themes rather than on the raw number of times a theme appeared. Qualitative analysis of the content was then done by examining the statements made by each woman. Interrater reliability for themes was .90; for category of response it was .80, but all disagreements were resolved by rereading and discussing the relevant passages of the interview protocols.

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TABLE 1

RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS OF INDIVIDUATION VS. RELATIONSHIP

Issue	Individuation	Relationship
Optimal Selfhood:	*Autonomy* Apart from group; autonomous; relig. experiences alone	*Connection* At one with group; interdependent; relig. experience needs group; affirmation of community
Optimal Modes:	*Rational / Logical* Faith/participation as logical; known through reason Religion provides understanding; must make sense	*Emotional / Intuitive* Faith/participation as emotional; known through intuition Religion provides emotional support; must feel right
	Abstract Principles Truth is absolute; only one faith can be right	*Principles in Context* Truth is tempered by context; all faiths have good and bad
Moral Ideals:	*Rights* Faith gives me entitlement	*Responsibility* Faith gives me responsibility
	Justice God is judging/just	*Care* God is forgiving/caring
Perceived Structure:	*Hierarchy* God controls my life God is distant and majestic	*Web* God offers guidance God is personal and intimate

RESULTS

Seven percent of the women denied that there was any gender inequality in their religious faiths (see Figure 1). A comment from a Methodist college student is typical of that group: "Yes [the church treats men and women equally], because we have women ministers and stuff. . . . Even the religion behind it I think [treats them equally]."

Sixteen percent acknowledged inequalities but accepted them as appropriate. As a student raised in the Eastern Orthodox Church said, describing her obedience to a God she conceived of as male, "It's more normal to be submissive to a man than it is to be submissive to a woman. It's more acceptable in my mind."

Eight percent, or 5 women, had rejected their faith, and in 4 of those cases gender issues appeared to play a role in their dissatisfaction. One formerly Catholic student noted the lack of suitable female role models in the Catholic church: "I think all the female figures in the Catholic religion were terrible, terrible role models for girls growing up in the Catholic faith . . . because they were submissive . . . but men did the exciting miracles. . . . Every position in the church is male . . . except the women who sell baked goods and decorate the altar." A woman raised as an Evangelical Christian commented, "The church puts the whammy on you, and women buy right into it." A student who had been first Lutheran and then Presbyterian summed it up: "I think most religions generally are sexist. . . . I think religion encourages conformity. . . . Because I have no religious [affiliation], I can pretty much set my own guidelines." In other words, disaffiliation permits avoidance of the problem, at least in the religious context.

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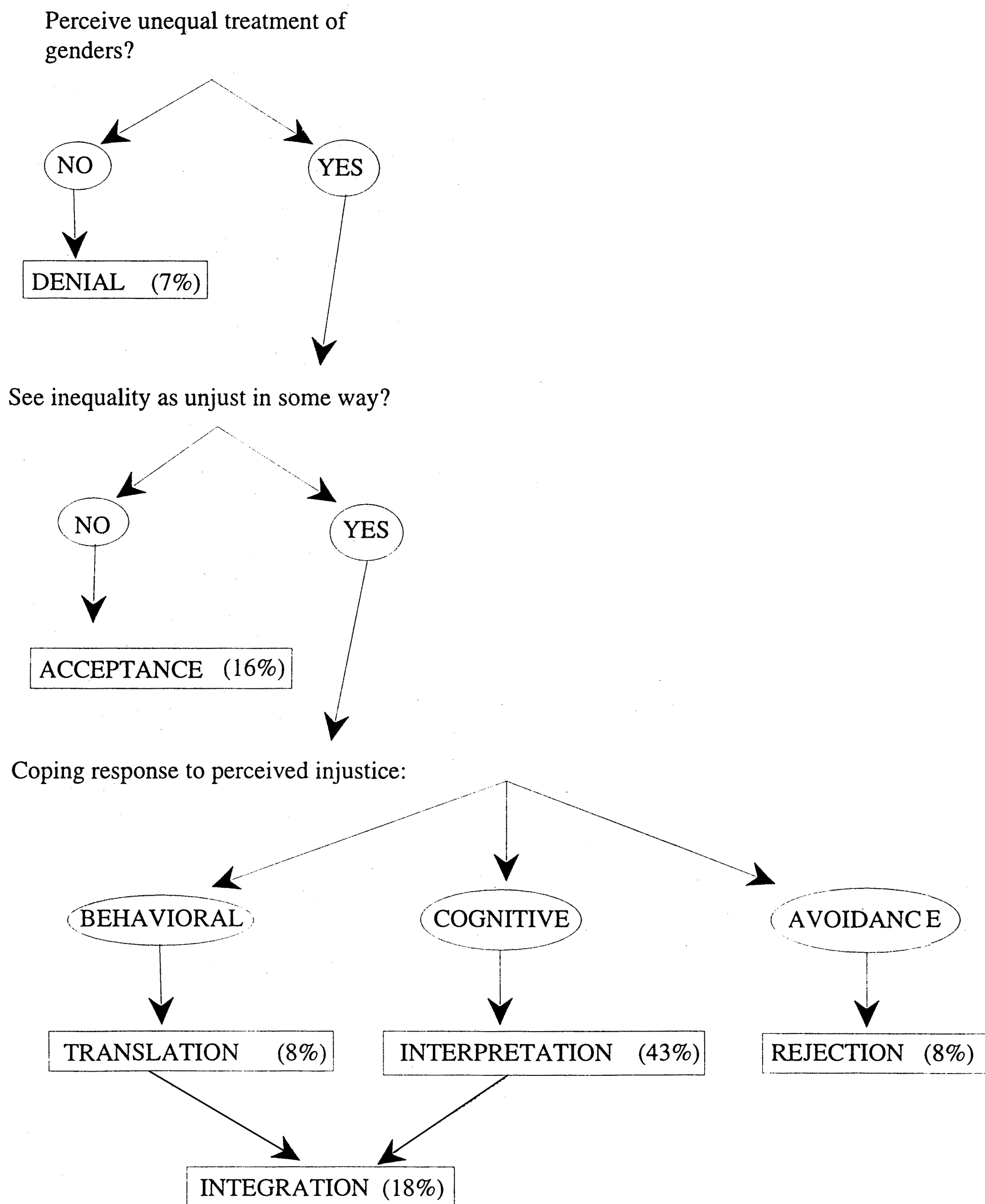
FIGURE 1

RESPONSES TO TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS



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Purely cognitive coping was by far the most common response, used by 43% of our participants, while purely behavioral coping was the least common response to perceived inequality, used by only 8%. This preference was most exaggerated in the oldest group and was actually reversed for the women in the middle group (thirties and forties). The difference between the age groups in preferred mode of response was statistically significant, χ^2 (6, N = 61) = 14.92, $p < .05$. The middle group was also more likely to integrate cognitive and behavioral strategies. Differences in response due to religious background affiliation could not be tested statistically due to the small numbers in some categories. However, 43% of the Protestant women used some kind of behavioral coping, while only 21% of the Catholic women and 20% of the Jewish women did — a substantial proportional difference.

Four behavioral strategies and four cognitive strategies were identified in the women's responses to perceived gender inequalities. Many women used more than one strategy. Requests for equal treatment (18%) and participation in feminist activities, such as a women's group at their church (13%), were the most common behavioral responses, while 3 respondents (5%) participated in open discussions of gender roles in religious groups where both men and women were present, and just one woman regularly requested that others use gender-inclusive language. It is worth noting that these strategies differ in one important aspect: that is, whether or not the status quo has changed. Feminist activities and even open discussion may simply draw on the support of like-minded others, while requests for equal treatment or inclusive language seek to alter the behavior of those who may not be sympathetic to the woman's concerns. Still, fewer than half used any of the behavioral strategies. The overwhelming tendency was to use interpretation.

Interpretation, or cognitive coping, is a reasonable response to a situation in which a woman feels unable or unwilling to act. She still has several choices. She can focus her attention on less distressing aspects of her religion — things she *does* like about it — or on more general problems that are not tagged as "women's issues," as this Methodist woman did: "It's not just men and women as equals. It's all people" (she went on to discuss the problems of racism and of discrimination against people who act different in church). Twenty percent of the women used this strategy. Alternatively, a woman can compare her faith favorably with other faiths or other social situations, as these women do: "[The Episcopalians] are definitely more advanced than the Catholics. . . . They can have women priests" (from an Episcopalian student); "What I see in the church is mild compared to what I have to deal with in the corporate world . . . even in the community" (from a Methodist businesswoman). Twenty-five percent used this kind of downward comparison. A woman may appeal to tradition as the basis for inequities, as this Catholic student does: "I wouldn't say that they do [treat women and men equally well], but . . . they don't do it on purpose, it's just the way it has always been done." This allows her to conclude, as many women did, that customs are changing for the better, a cause for optimism. Perhaps for this reason it was the most popular strategy, used by 34% of the women. Finally, a woman might substitute her own words, images or interpretations for those offered by her faith tradition, as this Catholic woman reports: "I can look at [religious] readings and make them into what I want them to mean for me. . . . I don't say 'Our Father,' I say, 'Our Being, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.' "Thirteen percent said they made such substitutions. Eighteen percent of the women combined at least one of these cognitive strategies with a behavioral response and so were classified as integrators.

The content analysis of themes clearly supports the hypothesis that women conceptualize religion in terms of relationship rather than individuation (see Table 2).

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TABLE 2

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN EXPRESSING INDIVIDUATION VS. RELATIONSHIP THEMES (N = 61)

Individuation	Relationship	Both	Neither
Autonomy 11 (18%)	Connection 25 (41%)	21 (34%)	4 (7%)
Reason 0 (0%)	Intuition 53 (87%)	2 (3%)	6 (10%)
Understanding 0 (0%)	Emotional support 52 (85%)	4 (7%)	5 (8%)
Abstract principles 5 (8%)	Principles in context 50 (82%)	4 (7%)	2 (3%)
Rights 1 (2%)	Responsibility 26 (43%)	0 (0%)	34 (56%)
God is just 1 (2%)	God is caring 33 (54%)	3 (5%)	24 (39%)
God controls 6 (10%)	God gives guidance 19 (31%)	0 (0%)	36 (59%)
God is distant 1 (2%)	God is personal 45 (74%)	5 (8%)	10 (16%)

In each of the eight categories of analysis, the relationship alternative was mentioned far more often than the individuation alternative. In addition, when participants' responses were summed across the eight categories, relationship scores exceeded individuation scores for every woman, a difference that was highly significant; t (61) = 18.66, $p < .001$. This difference was greater among the older women than among the students; t (30) = 2.19, $p < .05$. Many women repudiated the notion of a justice-oriented God in so many words, like this Unitarian woman: "I couldn't love a God that was lying in wait to punish me if I made a mistake."

DISCUSSION

The women's responses to perceptions of gender inequality are interesting because they resemble cognitive strategies for reducing discomfort that appear in other circumstances, for example, among women who have breast cancer (Taylor et al. 1983). Selective attention, comparable to what I call *other focus,* has been identified as a way of avoiding cognitive dissonance (Fiske and Taylor 1991), in this case, reconciling the idea that religion is good with a tradition of discrimination that is clearly not good. It may not be an empowering strategy, but it does allow the woman to get on with her religious life. Downward social comparison, here made mainly to other religions, is a strategy commonly used by victims to bolster self-image and spirits (Wills 1981; Taylor 1989), and it appears to be an effective one. In less extreme terms, downward comparison may allow women to accept negative aspects of a particular social situation by recasting or reframing it in a more positive light, by contrast with other social situations. Among the community women in this sample, work situations were the most commonly offered examples of worse discrimination. In this vein, Davidman describes how members of the Orthodox Jewish communities she studied often "creatively

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reinterpreted" their traditional religious practices to seem more in keeping with feminist values than were secular practices (1991, e.g., p. 158). Similar strategies seemed to operate among the white Southern Baptist women studied by Pevey (1994), who, as she puts it, "appropriate, reinterpret and subvert" the doctrine of their church in ways that empower them.

The most popular strategy among the women in this sample, an appeal to tradition or historical context, may also be thought of as cognitive reframing (Kahneman and Tversky 1984). These women appear to imagine that whatever progress their religion has made represents a segment of a trajectory, continuing indefinitely, borne on a rising tide of gender enlightenment. Thus, they recast what might be seen as a loss for women at the present time into a gain over times past. This may be a variation on the "contemporizing" of traditional religious issues that Davidman (1991) observed.

The substitution of one's own images, words, or interpretations for conventional ones may be thought of as a form of direct cognitive control, a strategy that has been shown to reduce stress in a variety of situations, including chemotherapy, dental work, and childbirth (Fiske and Taylor 1991). However, here it was the least popular cognitive strategy, perhaps because it involves the most effort, even though it has the greatest potential for liberation through actual change of circumstances. Perhaps it also deprives the woman of some sense of shared faith, relationship, or connectedness. How central is that connectedness to women's faith experience?

The women's responses to their religious community depended heavily on the extent of its connectedness, that is, the extent to which they perceived it as supportive, cooperative, and emotionally open. Catholics in particular sometimes saw their church as unnecessarily hierarchical or judgmental: "The priest is the intermediary, and that is one big problem I have with the Catholic church," complained a Catholic student; another Catholic student said, "If I love my neighbor as myself then I've got to love my neighbor for who they are, not for who I want them to be." When the community was accepting and caring, however, the women felt it filled both spiritual and emotional gaps in their lives: "[You knew] you had a group of people who really cared about you," said a Unitarian woman. One Methodist woman attributed her husband's recovery from a cerebral hemorrhage to the prayers of her church. Many women referred to their congregation, or a subset of it, as their "family." The religious community resembles the web of mutual care, at least in theory, and in practice the community provides opportunities for women to work together and to form close friendships with other women. Some of the Jewish and Protestant women suggested that a group of women is more likely to generate solid emotional support than a group that includes men. As a Unitarian woman put it, "Women support each other more than men commonly do." A Methodist woman explained it this way: "I think women are naturally less competitive, more cooperative, more inclusive."

Like Sered's informants (1987), many of the women in this sample said they thought that men's spirituality was probably different from women's. On the whole, these comparisons were unflattering to the male sex: "I think that women feel much more deeply . . . that women in general have greater depth for love, caring, generosity, spirit. . . . I think that men have been misled and taught to [act macho]. . . . They don't dare step aside of what is expected of them and I think they are truly frustrated," said a Unitarian woman. A Catholic student commented that masculinity is probably a hindrance in following Christ: "Jesus is more feminine than anything else. Women are more like Jesus Christ than men are." Her perspective is mirrored in Judith Bruder's story of her conversion to Christianity (1993). Bruder writes: "Didn't anyone ever notice the femininity of Jesus as he hung helpless on the cross, pierced by a soldier's spear thrust, spilling his water and blood? Biologically women are a nation of priests. . . . Women shed their own blood, sacrifice themselves, in the service of new life" (73–74). A lapsed Episcopalian student thought she would probably believe more

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in Christianity if Jesus had actually been female: "Maybe because I could identify more." She added that she saw Jesus as a predominantly "maternal" figure. Thus, for at least some of these women, as for the Orthodox Jewish women studied by Kaufman (1994), theology validates feminine rather than masculine values, and even traditional practices can be interpreted as supportive of feminine values such as caring and the stability of relationships.

Connectedness to God may also be part of the web. Although several of the Jewish women in this sample, like those in other studies (e.g., Davidman 1991), said they did not feel personally close to God, and some were unsure that God exists, the Christian women of all ages tended to describe a personal and often intensely emotional relationship with God, even when they were not entirely certain what God was like. One Methodist woman recalled having tea parties for God as a child and added, "It was a very personal relationship even way back then and still, whenever I'm in trouble or anything, He's the one I depend on." A Catholic student who held a less humanlike image of God still described her relationship to God as "very personal" and credited that relationship with pulling her out of a serious period of depression. A Lutheran student who likewise denied thinking of God as "a person" also defined her relationship with God as both personal and reciprocal: "I'm His child and I'm just as important to Him as anybody else is here on earth. . . . Everybody is important to Him. It just happens that He is as important to me as I feel I am to Him. It's a two-way relationship." If this is characteristic of at least Christian women's sense of God, it may partially explain their greater readiness than men to pray purely for emotional catharsis (Ozorak and Kosiewicz 1994).

These women also repeatedly mentioned service to others as an integral part of religious practice. This not only suggests a relational view of religion but is also congruent with Gilligan's "voice of relationship" (1982) in that it focuses on responsibility to others. One Catholic woman offered an anecdote about praying to win the lottery so that she could afford to buy winter coats for a poor neighbor's children (she won and bought the coats). A Unitarian woman elaborated on a quote from Thomas Jefferson: "He said that it is in our deeds and not our words that our religion is known. . . . Going to church is nice, but I really feel religious when I am working. I enjoy working with dying people. So, I really feel like that my God's work on earth is to do that kind of stuff." Even the students, whose work generally tends to draw them into themselves rather than out into the community, echoed such feelings, like this Lutheran student: "Another thing [I think a lot about is] the Sermon on the Mount. I take a lot of that very seriously, especially the part about 'love your neighbor as yourself' and 'whatsoever [you] do to the least of my brothers [you do to me].' I do a lot of community service, mostly for that reason."

Further congruence with Gilligan's model (1982) lies in the women's repeated emphasis on emotional and intuitive aspects of faith rather than sense and understanding. One Unitarian woman went so far as to reject reason explicitly as a path to faith: "There are things I don't want to understand. . . . I don't have to have things tested and proved for me. I like the mystery of religion." Most of the women also suggested that there are many possible roads to truth and that contexts is important in determining which will be best for an individual — another aspect of Gilligan's model. As a Catholic student put it, "Who knows what religion is right?"

CONCLUSION

It is always problematic to emphasize similarities between respondents at the expense of individual differences, which this sample certainly demonstrated, for example, in their preferences for ritual (or not), in the concreteness or abstraction of their religious metaphors, and in the extent to which they credited God with directly affecting events in their lives. On the other hand, it is striking that the women in this sample, almost without

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exception, emphasized the centrality of caring and community to their religious experience and insisted on a view of God as a friend and confidant rather than as a cosmic ruler or judge. This offers a possible explanation for the paradox proposed earlier. Being less glorified or less well represented is only of critical concern if the religious community is perceived primarily in terms of its hierarchy. That perspective invites a zero-sum conception of power that requires losers in order to have winners. By contrast, a weblike perspective allows the possibility of a community without losers, in which power emanates from the support of the community and so is increased by being shared. The loving and accepting God finds no one wanting and makes each individual feel special. Thus, although these women are aware of inequities, they see them for the most part as tangential to their faith experience, as annoying consequences of human wrongheadedness that need either to be worked on or overlooked in the context of an experience that is predominantly satisfying. As one Methodist woman put it: "Religion is about finding the center that I think all of us have. And through that center we relate to each other in ways that are helpful . . . to try to create, to try to move forward. The power that occurs from that is God power."

Women's cognitive reframing of the benefits of their religious involvement may simply reflect their general tendency to undervalue their own entitlements, as they do with respect to housework and child care (Major 1993). However, if we take these women at their word, the benefits of religious involvement are substantial. As a Unitarian woman said, "A good church is an extremely powerful support group. . . . Life is enriched by living in a community where there are fellow seekers." Many of the women felt that their relationships within the religious community and with God allowed them to be more fully themselves, to heal old wounds, to approach difficult tasks with courage. To have this kind of power is to pass it on. A Methodist businesswoman expressed it this way: "I have the power to make a difference, to be the hands that work for Jesus." It seems that these women, like the Evangelical Christians described by Ammerman (1987), experience God's power not just in God's goodness to them but in the work they feel God empowers them to do for others. Thus, they feel better about themselves in part because they believe that their own behavior and capabilities change for the better.

It is premature to generalize from these results; however, recent studies suggest that the sustaining nature of religious involvement is equally true for African-American women (Ellison 1993; Levin and Taylor 1993), as well as the conservative white Christians studied by Ammerman (1987) and Pevey (1994) and the Jews studied by Davidman (1991) and Kaufman (1991). More work is needed to examine the effects of social class, physical challenge, and sexual orientation on faith experience. Longitudinal work in this area is also sorely needed. It would be interesting to know whether some women move through the categories of response over time and what might trigger a change from one response style to another. It would be helpful to know more about how expectation and experiences with human relationships affect the way a woman interprets her faith journey. Some such work is already being done (Spilka et al. 1994; Hood and Morris 1994), but more connections need to be made to the cognitive mechanisms that might be responsible for the links. And, although comparison with men is not a necessary prerequisite to understanding women, it would be useful to know whether men show any similar patterns.

Most of the women in this study recognized that by hierarchical social standards, organized religion does not treat them as well as it might. Many described working hard for their churches and receiving precious little glory (as a Presbyterian student complained, "Why do we have to have a tougher row to hoe to get where we are going?"). But in absolute terms, they do not see themselves as disenfranchised. The power of connection and relationship, most essential to their own views of the faith experience, is available to them in abundance.

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