Re-Feminizing the Divine: Understanding the Cultural Constructs of Gender and Sexuality in a Church-Based Christian Community

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ABSTRACT

RE-FEMINIZING THE DIVINE: UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN A CHURCH-BASED CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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Northern Illinois University, 2024
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Historically, Christianity has sought to maintain rigid separation between men and women. Christianity often views women as secondary to men, particularly in relation to authority under Jesus Christ. These ideals have led to the restrictions of rights and roles of people who choose not to adhere to strictly defined or enforced gender roles. For this ethnography, I examined one church community; namely Barbwire Baptist Church in northern Illinois and how its members used scripture and doctrine beyond simply worship to reinforce norms and expectations of self and others regarding gender and sexuality. I draw on scholarship in gender studies, and theoretical frameworks including Black Feminist Theory and the anthropology of Christianity and religion more broadly. Two specific questions frame the study: First, how are ideals of gender performativity and sexuality transmitted intergenerationally among members of Barbwire Baptist Church? Second, what influences, if any, do religious symbols have on church members shared and divergent ideals of gender performativity and sexuality? I address these questions using ethnographic techniques including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis, concluding that while some members tend to police the actions of themselves and others, other members actively choose to break with traditional teachings. This research adds nuance to existing scholarship focused on the anthropology of religion, religious studies, and the study of gender and sexuality.
RE-FEMINIZING THE DIVINE: UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS OF
GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN A CHURCH-BASED CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

BY

CAMERON K THOMAS
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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Thesis Co-Directors:
Micah F. Morton and Dana N. Bardolph
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Thank you to the members of Barbwire Baptist, for allowing me into your space and granting me the privilege of understanding your world and sharing your knowledge with me. To my parents, family, and friends, thank you for your support and fostering my inquisitive mind from an early age. And finally, to my committee Drs, Micah Morton, Dana Bardolph, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, and Mark Schuller, thank you for the countless hours of support during one of the hardest processes of my life. Your advice and support have inspired me to create a document that I am truly proud of. You all are my community and I hope to have made you proud.
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STATEMENT OF POSITIONALITY

I write this thesis following in the footsteps of other Black anthropologists\(^1\), building upon their efforts to help decolonize anthropology and center the voice of marginalized communities. As a Black man born and raised in a tight knit religious community on the south side of Chicago, I was raised with a singular understanding of the relationship between people and divinity. Although the majority of my congregation were Black Jehovah’s Witnesses and my field site was largely white evangelicals, I strive to present their personal accounts in this work objectively. In conveying their stories, it would be almost impossible not to bring my voice to the discussion, particularly regarding the history and interpretation of the bible and biblical narratives. Though we come from essentially two separate worlds, my participants are considered a part of my larger religious community. My participant observations are simply an effort to bridge a gap in both my ethnographic skills and understandings of religious studies. To include the reader in this work, I will use first-person writing wherever fit to bring them closer to the experiences shared by participants. In the end, I hope this work serves all who read it.

In February of 2023, after nearly two years of background research, I began the culmination of a lifelong fascination with the study of religion. For some, religion serves as a seat of blind devotion, but for me, religion has only ever brought about more questions. I have

\(^1\) Zora Neale Hurston, Faye V. Harrison, Leith Mullings, Kathleen Sterling, Todne Thomas, Rebecca Louise Carter, Etc.
always believed that everything we are taught to blindly follow should be questioned, so why should religion be treated any differently? Growing up in a rather conservative religious community myself, the only thing that was fostered and often encouraged was my healthy obsession with questions, because as my pastor back home would say, “doubts are the growing pains of faith”. I questioned everything, from our relationship with God to the miracles described in the bible. Ultimately, to have a real relationship with God, it is necessary and normal to question both God and what is written, which informs the work that I present in this thesis.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents the results of an ethnographic study on how ideals of gendered performance and subsequently sexual performance are understood and translated generationally through a particular close-knit church-based community in northern Illinois. The data presented in this thesis derive from my time spent with a church community that I refer to as Barbwire Baptist Church (a pseudonym I use throughout to protect the anonymity of the field site). Through my analysis of ethnographic data, including participant observation data and insights gathered from six semi-structured interviews, I found that the majority of members within the community operate within a social framework that exists through a Foucauldian policing of oneself and others as it relates to gendered and sexual performance.

Because gender is socially constructed and has a complex history, it is crucial to define gender. Amy Blackstone (2003) describes gender as the meanings, values, and characteristics that are culturally assigned based on sex. Gender operates distinct from sex as it explicitly defined by cultural experience (Blackstone 2003). These cultural experiences can be and are manifested differently by each person. For example, though one person may be assigned one sex, through their experience of the world they may actively go against this distinction through gendered expression. Blackstone’s definition is fundamental in this case for studying gender
because it allows gender to be understood as a product of the relationship between people and culture.

At its most basic, religion, like culture, is one of the most fundamental ways we as humans can experience and make sense of the world. As Abdulla (2018) argues, the relationship between culture and religion is expressed in the motivation and manifestation of cultural expression. This dynamic relationship can be seen through much of U.S. culture where gendered representations of religious symbols, such as the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, act as a way of ‘civilizing’ the unstable, feminine, and racialized other (Agathangelou and Ling 2003). These symbols act as a visual manifestation of the relationship between humans and the divine that denote a specific kind of belief and behavior.

For some, the relationship between humans and the divine is often viewed through a lens of domination. Orit Avishi (2008) argues that often, when studying the experiences of women within conservative religious sects, these experiences are typically framed through a paradox that questions the nature of their compliance. This issue of compliance serves as both a mechanism for understanding perceived agency and violence towards the other. Domination when viewed this way provides insight into the ways religion, particularly Christianity, has been used to justify and perpetuate violence against individuals, in particular women who are burdened with proving their masculinity. This is clearly seen through the biblical text, in this instance the gospel of Timothy, where female authority is directly tied to the ability to be perceived as male:

“Behold I will take Mary, and make her a male, so that she may become a living spirit, resembling you males” (Pagels 1976:294). This process of violence results in a hyper-masculine devaluation of all things associated with femininity, including but not limited to women, sexuality, and homosexuality (Agathangelou and Ling 2003). As such, this violence rests on and generates a discourse that suggests women can
only be allowed to participate if they deny their female identity and assume a male identity instead.

Overall, through this thesis project, I was able to garner the extent to which the portrayal of Mary in Luke and Matthew, and the characterization of Jesus Christ through the bible, serves as the bedrock for subsequent biblical and social constructions of gendered norms (e.g., virginity, celibacy) for a particular Christian community in Northern Illinois as it relates to mainstream U.S. society (Solberg 2018). For my thesis research, I drew on these biblical sources as a primary source of doctrine, alongside participant observation to examine and understand the significance of religious symbols as it relates to the gendered dynamics of the church, and how these symbols relate to the ideals of gender performativity and sexuality as understood and experienced by certain members of Barbwire Baptist, a conservative Christian community in Northern Illinois in, a rural midwestern area located about two hours west of Chicago. Northern Illinois has a racial demographic that is majority white, with 60 percent of the population being white and the other 40 percent identifying as Black or other (World Population Review 2024). Thirty percent of this population self-identifies as Christian.

In engaging the idea of ‘going native’ and blurring the lines between participation and observation, I argue that members of Barbwire Baptist exist within a paradox of praxis that is displayed clearly through all levels of church hierarchy. Moreover, I argue that ideals of gender and sexuality are not only instilled in members of the church but also permeate into secular life in a way that distorts the cultural ‘separation’ of church and state. Barbwire Baptist in particular serves as the seat for this study because of its members strict adherence (or so it would seem) to rigid ideals of gender and sexuality in contrast to societal shifts. To grasp how the phenomena occurs, first we must investigate the church. Barbwire Baptist has a male-dominated leadership
structure and espouses an official doctrine of hetero cis-normativity. For example, the church’s website includes the following statement: “Participation in other forms of sex (fornication, homosexuality, bisexuality, bestiality, incest, adultery, pornography) or sex alteration (changing one’s sex) is a perversion of God’s gift and is to be summarily avoided (Romans 1:18-27, 13:13; Jude 1:7)” (Barbwire Baptist 2023).

Overview of the Thesis

In chapter two, I explain in detail the methodology used in this study. I also address the theoretical frameworks used to guide this study, which include insights from gender studies, Black Feminist Theory, and the anthropology of Christianity as well as key concepts that shaped how I as the researcher collected and interpreted the data. In chapter three, I introduce the church and lay the foundation for fieldwork, while exploring and analyzing the importance of community to the members of Barbwire Baptist. In chapter four, I explore gendered images related to divinity and the role of women within the church. Chapter five explores ideals of sex and sexuality among members of Barbwire Baptist church. Finally, in chapter six, I conclude by discussing my overall findings in conversation with existing literature on religious identity, gender performativity, and sexuality. Specifically, I consider the ways in which the results of this study contradict, differ, or confer with the findings of existing literature.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter addresses the methods used in this study and the theoretical frameworks of gender studies, Black Feminist Theory, and the anthropology of Christianity that have guided the study and data analysis. It also presents key ideals from each framework such as intersectionality, gender, sexuality/queerness, structuralism, singular Christian experience versus a monolithic Christianity, agency of women, and femininity. In addition, the distinction between sex (the act), sex (biological), gender and sexuality are considered, when addressing both the methods and analysis for this research study.

Methods

I started my fieldwork in early February 2023 and ended in the beginning of June 2023. During the data collection phase, I spent nearly every Sunday (roughly 15 weeks) attending church service, and after attending regular service I would mingle among the members. After a few weeks of attending service and establishing myself with the members of Barbwire Baptist, I set out to conduct interviews. To recruit participants, I used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. To initially meet participants, I relied on convenience, which “consists of any group readily accessible to the researcher that reasonably might be assumed to possess characteristics relevant to the study” (Schensul et al. 1999:233). I approached individuals who were friendly, including members of church leadership, that I was able to interact and who were easily accessible (i.e., willing to talk to a strange new face) during the
early stages of fieldwork. Due to time constraints, I was only able to set up six formal interviews. To facilitate the interviews, I sought out fellowship with fellow Christians and went through the initial processes of becoming a member of Barbwire Baptist Church. My position as a potential member attempting to join a new community gave me an advantage in gaining my participants’ trust, which I believe greatly simplified the recruitment process. After I felt more comfortable in the field site, I began to share with the other members the true nature of this thesis report to limit as much as possible any potential ethical issues that could arise from not being forthcoming before the interview process.

Because my main reason of being in attendance was to study the members of Barbwire Baptist and not seek religious teaching, I often found myself questioning the teaching of the sermon and try as I might my own personal questions bled over into my interviews. My positionality does not exist independent of the research process; as Chiseri-Strater (1996) argues, “all researchers are positioned whether they write about it explicitly, separately, or not at all” (1996:115). One aspect that could not be concealed was my Blackness, I wear it proudly. It dictates how I navigate life and my presence when I enter every room. Another aspect was being raised Jehovah’s Witness; my own upbringing has fostered a relationship with God that helped me generate the questions that would later become the interview guide used for this study. My pre-existing knowledge and experience with religious teachings; specifically Christian, made the process of creating interview questions a bit complicated for me, as I did not want my interviews to be an intense debate of scripture and bible sayings. Rather I was more inclined to hear my interviewees’ experiences and how they shaped their ideas.
My research project was conducted among a community of fundamentalist Christians at a majority white upper-middle class church. Barbwire Baptist is one of 20 churches in the immediate surrounding area. What was once two separate structures, a schoolhouse, and a gymnasium, now serves a dual purpose as a worship hall and leadership space. The buildings were first built in the 1980s, and once occupied by a Dutch Baptist community now house a congregation with well over 50 people in attendance every Sunday.

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with certain members of Barbwire Baptist and collected information about how ideas concerning gender and sexuality are transmitted among members of the community. I used a technique called ‘snowball sampling’ to secure as many participants as I could. This technique worked best because it relies on already established connections between participants, for example two participants were friends who played videogames together outside of church. According to Kirchherr and Charles (2018), “Snowball sampling is a commonly employed sampling method in qualitative research, used in medical science and in various social sciences, including sociology, political science, anthropology and human geography”. My initial plan was to secure 10-12 interviews, with the hopes of keeping the interviews as diverse as possible from background to ideals. However, during the fieldwork process, I was only able to complete six interviews due to limited time to collect data. I conducted two initial interviews and one follow up interview with church leadership, and three interviews with members of the congregation.

All the participants identified as white, with three men and two women, all who consider themselves cisgendered individuals. It was my goal during both my research and

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analysis to identify and foreground the ideas and expertise of marginalized individuals within the community with a particular interest in non-gender conforming individuals, but due to limitations of time and privacy, I was unable to do so. The age range of my participant pool was between 22-45 years of age. This age group provided me with the easiest time connecting and building rapport. Within this demographic, I was able to gauge how differences, such as gender, sexuality, age, and positionality within the church, impact the transmission of gendered and sexual performance.

During the interview process, I asked questions that teased out and facilitated discussion that focused on interviewee’s backgrounds, identities, and experiences in the church with a focus on the roles that each has played in shaping their current ideas and practices of gender performativity and sexuality (See appendix 1). Interviews ranged anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours. Because of the open-endedness of semi-structured interviews, interviews would often get off track with fluid conversation. Before the interviews began, I informed each participant about my research and goals with the project, while also assuring them that I would be providing pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and that of the church. I provided a document explaining their rights as an interviewee and explained consent in more detail. The interviews consisted of a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions about the lives of the participants, their relationship with Christianity, and how they understand the relationship between sex and gender. Questions included: “Can you describe your upbringing and background?”, “How long have you been a member at Barbwire? What is your role within the church?”, “How do you understand the relationship between men and women?”, and “What are your opinions about same-sex relationships?”, among others. I also asked about how they experience Christianity and how they see themselves represented in their faith. Aside from semi-
structured interviews conducted at a location of the interviewee’s choice, I conducted participant observation in the church. Overwhelmingly, religious studies literature suggests that church-based communities provide their members with agency and space to reaffirm their identities and relationships with God (Robbins 2014, Kleger 2019, Harding 1991, Doak 2019). I observed the activities of church members during and after service and interviewed participants about their personal relationship with the teachings. I also observed the social dynamics within the church, e.g., who chose to sit with whom, how they interacted with each other after service and during their secular activities, etc. In attempting to become part of the community, I attended most Sunday services during the fieldwork period, early February to early June, and I was invited to attend a semi-regular videogame event hosted by a member of church leadership as well as several lunches with interviewees and other members. In addition to participant observation, I employed textual analysis. Because Barbwire Baptist members are fundamentalist Christians, the messages garnered from text are often understood as the literal word of God and often express a desire of returning to a previous ideal that members have strayed away from (Marsden 2006; 1990). Ultimately, during the research process I was able to elicit data from participants through semi-structured interviews that explored a wide range of experiences of church members in relation to gender and sexuality. These interviews shed light on how they view their identities, and the way they navigate that identity based on their backgrounds, such as age, race, gender, education, sexuality, political affiliation, and socio-economic background. All these factors were assumed to influence how they interacted with the church and understood gendered ideals. In addition to observing how these factors played into understanding the relationship between members and the church, I also took note of where each participant chose to conduct their interview. I chose to allow each participant to choose where we held their interview to provide a
sense of comfort and safety to answer freely.

Following my interviews, I coded the data into major themes that appeared across each one. Because of the small sample size, I elected to transcribe my interviews by hand using Microsoft Word and coded them using content analysis. I read each transcript and highlighted each piece of data that correlated with my research questions. While highlighting during the analysis process, I noted the frequency of themes as they arose and separated my data into piles according to the themes observed. The first theme observed was community. For members of Barbwire Baptist, they have a close-knit community unified through a common belief in God, but where they differ from other surrounding Christian communities is that they strictly adhere to the Bible and choose not to differ from its teachings, except in instances of open-endedness in the Bible. The second theme observed was how gendered perceptions affect the roles allowed with the church. As fundamentalist Christians, adherence to the Bible is the most important tenant of their faith, and as such the Bible in most cases has set out clear distinctions on what it deems acceptable for both men and women to do in relation to service of Jesus Christ. The last theme observed was sexuality and morality. These themes were contextualized and informed by the following theoretical frameworks.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

**Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Theory serves as a way of framing intellectual thought that moved away from traditional research methods that privilege white cis-hetero voices and research paradigms and centers the importance of intersectional aspects of our identity. Broadly speaking Black
Feminist Theory acts as a helpful tool that creates a “form of solidarity […] because of the value of Black Feminist Theory beyond application to or by Black women” (Sterling 2015:94). In my research and analysis, I identified and foregrounded the ideas and expertise of individuals who exist in a dichotomy/binary of thought that privileges religious doctrine over lived experience with respect to gender and sexuality, while also attempting to seek out dominated/marginalized voices whenever possible. By widening the focus to include voices generally overlooked, we create a pool of information that is truly rich and reflective of the community. As Lorde (1984:45) argues, “we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we are defined by others.”

According to Patterson et al. (2016), when applied to the field of anthropology, Black Feminist Theory offers a critical and insightful response to hetero-cis-normativity and addresses the reality of the marginalization of non-gender conforming people. Importantly, the distinction between white feminism and intersectional (Black) feminism, recognizes that for the most part, feminism has largely benefited white women and white female scholars, whereas the voices of marginalized people, specifically Black women, have long been alienated and treated as inferior. When applying Black Feminist Theory to methods of research, it acts as a counter-narrative that seeks to challenge Western intellectual traditions of exclusivity and chauvinism (Clemons 2019). I employed Black Feminist Theory throughout the entire research process, specifically in terms of analysis, writing and the formation of questions. I chose to not use this thesis to critique Christianity as a religion; rather, this thesis questions the reality that members of Barbwire Baptist place themselves in.

Centering the issues of women and the marginalized other, Black Feminist Theory gives researchers the means to bridge gaps that arise in the research process. By broadening the scope to include the perspectives of oppressed individuals, it gives greater nuance to the understanding
women, people of color, the poor, and marginalized people more broadly have about society and helps establish their credibility to conceptualize the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. Utilizing Black Feminist Theory as a driving framework allows researchers to see women and other marginalized groups as unique collectives that exist within the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and more that shape and define their actions.

Black Feminist interpretation of the Bible looks at the personal experiences of African American women and their engagement with biblical text in light of those experiences, particularly as women of color. But this concept is not primarily a “Black” thing. To understand Black Feminist biblical interpretation as simply a racial identifier misconstrues the original understanding of the concept. A Black Feminist biblical interpretation is not merely a derivative of (white) feminist biblical interpretation because, it includes the experiences and interactions African American women have had with biblical texts that have marked the thinking, writing, speaking, and activism of many from both past and present.

Understanding Gospels like Luke through a Black feminist lens forces the reader to focus on gender and power relationships in a biblical context. For example, Green (2016) presents a narrative of Luke, that “Jesus came to liberate the oppressed by inverting power from those that society privileges with rank and stature to those often marginalized and disenfranchised” (2016:291). Green addresses the Gospel of Luke first by understanding that the dynamics of power are shifted in the kingdom of heaven, where the disenfranchised are valued and their wellbeing is greatly ensured. Green writes that in “the kingdom of God [there is] a different political reality that transforms the social landscape where everybody’s free” (Green 2016:291). This sentiment particularly is important to this study because it flips how difference is understood on earth if in heaven all are free.
Anthropology of Christianity

Robbins (2014) writes that the anthropology of Christianity aims to study lived human experiences of Christianity in different cultural contexts. This approach can be applied to the study of gender and sexuality in a cross-cultural framework. For much of its history with Christianity, anthropology has chosen to focus on Pentecostalism. But in shifting away from a one size fits all mode of Christianity as argued by Marshall (2014), we open anthropology and Christianity to a ‘critical reflection’ of its past and its future.

“Anthropological attention to Pentecostalism as a specific iteration of Christianity has been an extremely fruitful entry point for anthropologists to engage critically with their discipline’s approach to the study of Christianity or lack thereof as well as with its broader epistemological assumptions” (Marshall 2014:344).

Importantly, anthropologists studying Christianity stress that scholars cannot simply assume they know the Christian experience, but rather that each local variation must be encountered on its own terms (Cannell 2006). In other words, we must move from the study of Christianity to the study of Christianities in the plural.

In an important review of the burgeoning field of the anthropology of Christianity, Joel Robbins notes that with a few exceptions, “the study of gender has not been central to the anthropology of Christianity thus far” (2014:165). As discussed in Robbins (2014:165), anthropologists Annelin Eriksen (2008, 2014) and Maya Mayblin (2010, 2014) argue that “much of the earlier literature on Christianity and gender (is) primarily concerned with sociological issues such as the nature of gender identities and the way they determine persons’ abilities to assume leadership and public roles within various churches.” Eriksen (2014) and Mayblin (2014) examine the ways in which “Christianity itself is gendered” or, in other words, “how notions of
gender difference are fundamental to Pentecostal and Catholic Christian cosmologies” (Robbins 2014:165). Ultimately, as Page and Yip (2021) argue, by including more intersectional voices in future research creates a more active documentation of religious voice.

To fully understand the significance of symbols, such as Mary(s), and give commentary on the connection between religion and the social constructs of gender and sexuality, this thesis project draws in part on the gospel of Luke and Matthew to provide a necessary historical framework. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew act as affirmation of Christ to Christian believers of all times, rather than a simple idealization of Mary. Importantly, the portrayal of Mary and her relationship to divinity in Luke and Matthew serves as the basis for the creation of the dominant social construct of virginity in mainstream U.S. society, which has long drawn on conservative Christian ideals. Moving from biblical text to cultural context, this social construction of virginity has become a pervasive weapon used by men and women in the U.S. to control ideas and practices of gender and sexuality within both the church and secular communities.

**Gender and Sexuality**

While sex is grounded in biological and anatomical characteristics that are assigned at birth, gender is understood rather as a social construct. When thinking anthropologically about gender, researchers must understand that it is a socially constructed performance of identity that tends to adhere to socially expected norms with respect to masculinity and femininity. In some contexts, these gendered constructions of identity operate within a binary or oppositional system that acts as a binary system people occupy. Understanding binaries, or what something is by understanding what it is not, is a fundamental component of structuralism (Levi-Strauss 1951). Not unlike language, gender is comprised of hidden rules that govern peoples’ behavior. Structuralism suggests that these ‘hidden rules’ and how people understand them are universally
constructed according to binary oppositions. Binary oppositions are founded in a theoretical framework where opposites are strictly defined and set-off against each other.

In most, if not all, contemporary Christian communities in the United States, especially in the field site, there exists an underlying assumption that gender exists in a binary and often assumed complementary relationship, with emphasis on ‘traditional’ family units where men situate themselves as the dominate and with the women as the subordinate. Gender, as we know it, is relational. For Barbwire Baptist, gender identities are understood as distinct yet complementary. This notion applies to roles at home, in the church, and beyond. Gender acts as something not decidedly synonymous with sex, but rather a social construct that is specific to a place and time.

Thus, to take gender and conversations about gender seriously, it must involve more than simply “adding women in” (Peterson 2000), because gender is not what we are biologically, but rather the ideological and material relationships that exist between male and female (Steans 1998). This binary conception of gender is clearly stated in the following official statement of the Barbwire Baptist Church:

We believe that God wonderfully creates each person as male or female according to His design. These two distinct, complementary genders together reflect the image and nature of God (Barbwire Baptist 2023).

Importantly, gender must be understood in relation to systems of power. Foucault (1998) argues that power is not wielded but rather is dispersed, pervasive, and a factor of everyday life. The relationship between power and sexuality is often misrepresented. Often sexuality is viewed as an unruly force that power opposes, represses, or constrains. But rather, sex and sexuality must be understood as a construct through which power is expressed. This notion is especially seen in the gender norms that are so engrained in us that we hardly notice them in our
perceptions and lead us to discipline ourselves without any willful coercion from others. In understanding power as constitutive of that upon which it acts, we can recognize that the relationship of gender and power serves to reproduce and reinforce already existing power structures.

By conceptualizing gender as part of a social structure (Risman 2004), we can give gender the same significance as other social institutions that influence everyday life (e.g., politics and economics). By understanding the social structure of gender and sexuality in the context of everyday lived experience, we can see the indirect actions that shape people’s “perceptions of their interests” and choices (Risman 2004). As Risman (2004:432) notes:

[As] women and men see themselves as different kinds of people, then women will be unlikely to compare their life options to those of men. Therein lies the power of gender. In a world where sexual anatomy is used to dichotomize human beings into types, the differentiation itself diffuses both claims to and expectations for gender equality.

For many other cultures, however, both within and beyond the United States, gender is perceived and practiced in a less binary fashion, which affords a legitimate space of belonging for other gender categories beyond simply man and woman and recognizes varying degrees of gender fluidity. For example, Reddy and Nanda (2005) argue that in some communities, namely India’s Hijras, people exist in an ‘alternate’ identity that exists outside of the binary frame of gender. Within certain Native American communities there are those outside of the gender binary who exist as Two-Spirit persons. As a result, it is fundamental to the study of gender to understand how and when different societies construct, perceive, and practice gender roles, whether they be clearly defined in a binary fashion or more ambiguous and fluid.

It is equally important when discussing issues of gender to distinguish between biological sex (i.e. male, female, intersex), desire (sexuality/attraction), and the act of having sex. Sex is
thought of as the biological difference between female and male, and the real or assumed psychological differences dependent on these (Beauvoir 2011[1949]). It has been shown that the only such distinction is that people assigned female can give birth, while those assigned male cannot. Though there are no innate psychological differences between the sexes, people are in fact socialized through gender differently based on perceived biological sexual differences (Beauvoir 2011[1949]). Often associated with sex and gender, the concept of sexuality refers to thoughts, desires, and actions associated with acts of intimacy including intercourse, which in turn creates a complex way people navigate and experience their own bodies.

Expanding on gender theory, Judith Butler discusses “gender performativity” (1993), which she describes “not (as) a singular 'act' or event” but rather a ritualized production that is reiterated again and again through certain constraints such as taboos and prohibitions that police the self and others. It is either the threat of ridicule, violence, and death, or the promise of acceptance, that compels people to perform and maintain these ritualized performances of gender according to societal standards and expectations to be perceived as normal. Ultimately, Butler sees this performance as a conscious effort that people, especially marginalized others (e.g., queer and non-conforming), make to navigate socio-cultural structures they encounter daily. Victor Turner (1988) similarly argues that everything we as humans do acts as a performance in society. Whether through the clothes we wear, the conversations we hold, or the food we eat. All of these things act as a performative signal-system that reinforces the social identities we put on ourselves and others, and that we have either chosen or been compelled to adopt.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the methods I used to collect data and the theoretical frameworks that guided my data collection and analysis. This chapter
also provides a review of key literature crucial to the interpretation of my field data. In the next three chapters, I present my ethnographic field data and elaborate on the process of participant observation.
CHAPTER 3
LIKE FROGS IN BOILING WATER

“Our youth are like frogs in boiling water, slowly getting used to the hot water.”

-Parable (unknown author)

Unlike other places of worship, Barbwire Baptists’ worship hall has little that separates
the preacher from his ‘flock.’ Akin to amphitheaters of ancient times, this realm of worship
shaped like a semi-hexagon could house even the 12 disciples almost 10 times over. The stage
itself is adorned with only a gleaming cross. The implement of Jesus’ torture repositioned as a
tool of devotion. As one of the head pastors - ‘Jeremiah’- says, “The cross is enough” (February
5, 2023). Pastor Jeremiah is a man of short stature who stands roughly 5ft 8in tall with jet-black
raven hair and a salt-and-pepper beard. He speaks with great conviction as if the words flow
from the Bible through his fingers and out his mouth. For Christians, the cross acts as a catalyst
for faith signifying a shared belief in Christ’s sacrifice when he was crucified, and for barbs (the
parishioners of Barbwire Baptist), this serves as the only thing they need to show devotion to
Jesus. The stage is situated only a few steps away from the congregation, providing the perfect
position for the pastor to deliver each week’s sermon.

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3 All names provided in the next three chapters are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of
participants.
This chapter sets the scene for what being a member of Barbwire Baptist entails. Through participant observation, I went through the process of seeking out membership in the community of Barbwire fellowship, like scholars before me who actively chose to be a part of the experiences and lives of the people studied, to the best of my ability instead of speaking for them but rather with them (Hurston 1938, Geertz 1973, Wickman-Crowley 2000, Hansen 2018, Carter 2019, Thomas 2021). By ideally centering this study on the lives of marginalized people within the church, such as women and non-leaders, I aim to avoid theoretical and theological models that create the trap of reproducing western liberal academic tropes that see “the religious as not quite modern” (Mahmood 2012).

With rigid timelines and strict fellowship requirements, Barbwire Baptist at first glance from the outside functions like closed practices and institutions of yesterday—to be one of us you must already be one of us—just without the dark robes and hooded figures. Yet, for members of Barbwire Baptist, Christianity does not operate as ‘separate’ from their everyday life but rather as a living factor that is consistently considered when they navigate life (Mahmood 2012).

For many U.S. citizens, Christianity acts as driving force that governs the way they navigate daily life: the metaphorical sheep in Jesus’ flock. These followers dominate secular life, where Christian ideals seep into our everyday life—from how we distinguish time to our money, even with the pledge of allegiance. This is no different for members of Barbwire Baptist Church, which sits neatly nested in the middle of northern Illinois, a rural tight-knit community that barely scratches over 18,000 people. But despite its small numbers in population compared to surrounding areas, there are over 20 churches of either Christian or other denominations.
Clothing, Community, and Christ

“Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron to give him dignity and honor.”

Exodus 28:2

As a near 6-foot-tall Black man with tattoos and piercings, it is sufficient to say that I woefully stick out in a crowd. This is especially the case in a crowd that is notably older and white. As I walk into church on a frosty winter morning, I see no grand podium, nor bejeweled altar, there is only a simple music stand to hold the pastor's bible and a few extra pages for notes. The only semblance of grandeur comes from the giant projection screen that allows the congregation to keep up with the band during hymnals. This is the scene I walk into my first day visiting Barbwire Baptist. To say I was taken aback by this sight would be an understatement. I was dressed in my Sunday best, which was a pressed pair of khaki slacks, white button down with a sweater, polished loafers, and my hair slicked back in a neat ponytail. I stumbled through the doors of the church and saw everyone else dressed casually in hoodies and jeans, a sight that would give my religious grandmother a heart attack. Fresh out of the cold winter air, I was immediately greeted by a number of hands reaching outstretched to be shaken as I am ushered into the worship hall. Hand after hand outstretched lead me down this path of seemingly sweet faces. Transferred from one usher to the next, I am hurried to my seat as the service begins. Once service begins, a silence washes over the entirety of the fellowship. A simple prayer with heads bowed begins my first service at Barbwire. This service is one of many to follow focused on the Book of Exodus.
On this particular day, the subtopic of the sermon is about being clothed in righteousness. For members of Barbwire Baptist, being clothed in righteousness acts as a seat for one type of religious performance. Pastor Jeremiah delivers his sermon as follows:

“What people wear signifies many parts of their life and purpose, shows us who among us is ready for Christ” (February 5, 2023).

Clothing in this instance is a symbolic reference to being covered by God’s grace. Though some are oblivious to it, clothing/dress acts to signify a relationship with Christ, our understanding of man’s corruption, and coupled with faith acts as a mechanism for religious performance. Pastor Jeremiah continues:

“Jesus is the highest mediator between God and man, Believers in Christ are Priests clothed in righteousness” (February 5, 2023).

Anthropologist Terence Turner (2012[1980]) argues:

Decorating, covering, uncovering, or otherwise altering the human form in accordance with social notions of everyday propriety or sacred dress, beauty or solemnity, status, or changes in status, or on occasion of the violation and inversion of such notions, seems to have been a concern of every human society of which we have knowledge. This objectively universal fact is associated with another of a more subjective nature—that the surface of the body seems everywhere to be treated, not only as the boundary of the individual as a biological and psychological entity but as the frontier of the social self as well (pg. 486).

This performance is something that members of Barbwire Baptist must consistently work to achieve, where their goal is to be situated among God and Jesus in Heaven. Thus, for members of Barbwire Baptist, being clothed in righteousness both physically and metaphorically shows their ‘connection’ to a higher power external to themselves. Though members tend to dress more casually for church service, it is still expected for them to be fully covered without tattoos or markings showing, and to appear neat and presentable. This was a sentiment I overheard a young parent share with their daughter as I walked into the church that morning. But
even with older generations in the church this policing was expressed, as I was told by an older woman who noticed my tattoos to “make sure you keep those covered in God’s house”. This policing of the body perfectly illustrates Foucault's argument of how to control society; Foucault (1998) argues that if one has power over the bodies that constitute the population, they in turn have control over society's direction.

Clothing and dress act as metaphorical representations of Barbwire Baptist’s members’ relationship with God, and of who does and does not belong. For members, being ‘devout’ followers of Christ places them in a scarred position wherein they are at all times bathed in the ‘blood’ of Christ due to his sacrifice on the cross: “The adornment and public presentation of the body, however inconsequential or even frivolous a business as it may appear to individuals, is for cultures a serious matter” (Turner 2012[1980]:486). So, according to members, being clothed in righteousness is more than simply covering the body and being modest—a theme explored in later chapters—but rather is a constant, albeit unspoken, unifier of their community and a signifier of their own cultural makeup and identification with Christ.

Studying both clothing and Christians/Christianity shows an archetypal shift towards a social structure where clothing is more tied to agency, practice, and power (Hansen 2004; Schneider 1987; Turner 2012[1980]) and demonstrates that “clothing has become a converging point for conflicting values, [...] interactions across class, between genders and generations, and in recent global cultural and economic exchanges” (Hansen 2004:372). Ultimately, religion either overtly or covertly has used clothing to maintain customs and traditions, thus establishing a visual identity and cultural markers that link people to a particular religion/religious practice while simultaneously exerting control over the individual. This is seen more overtly with certain Islamic faiths but, nonetheless is still observed here.
Immediately following service, I, along with other ‘new’ potential members, are ushered up the stairs away from the worship hall to a small room where we are introduced to a few members of church leadership. This was a meeting held semi-regularly called ‘Discover’, where prospective members ask questions about church dynamics over light refreshments. The Discover meeting is held in a small conference room taken up mostly by a large wooden table and two flat screen TVs. At the head of the table sit pastors Jeremiah and Jonah. These two switch off leading service on Sundays. Besides the pastors and I, in the room are a newly married couple, three women, two men, and the head of youth Ministry ‘Malcolm’. While we all sit down for a simple catered lunch, the pastors go through a set of prepared slides to introduce themselves and the church mission, followed by an informal question and answer portion. After about 45 minutes of going through the outlined materials, we are released to enjoy the rest of our day. I decided to stay behind and formally introduce myself to the pastors without a crowd. After this, typically a week or two later, those who attend ‘Discover’ are invited to attend an informational session called ‘Church 101’.

Attending both Discover and Church 101 serves a pivotal role in becoming a part of the Barbwire Baptist community/Church. The importance of community and its role in fostering spiritual growth, providing support, and promoting the values and teachings of the faith was a factor stressed even from my first-time attending service. The creation of community (reverence of the Body of Christ in both a physical and social sense) is an essential part of Christian life and is rooted in the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ and the early Church. As Todne Thomas (2021) explains, connections through spiritual kinship “transcend […] beyond normative
Before the reformation in the early 1500s, the Christian Church was grounded in the community.

In the Gospels, Jesus emphasized the significance of loving one's neighbor and being in fellowship with others (Romans 12:16). He frequently engaged in communal activities, such as sharing meals, teaching, and healing in groups, and calling his disciples to live and work together. Through these actions, Jesus demonstrated the value of community and the power of collective worship, learning, and service (1Pet. 4:8-11). Ultimately, the early church was centered in the homes of men and women and relied on people coming and working together.

Following Jesus' example, the early Christian community was characterized by a deep sense of unity and mutual support in opposition to experienced widespread persecution. They met regularly, shared their possessions, and supported one another in times of need. This sense of community provided a strong foundation for the growth and spread of the Christian faith.

Though this sense of community and the strength of others in worship is woven throughout the Bible, some members of Barbwire Baptist often felt excluded. This point was illustrated by community member Alicia, who I interviewed one weeknight after she got off work. Alicia is a freshly graduated former student from the local college who started attending Barbwire Baptist a year or so off and on before the start of this study. Growing up mixed (white and Mexican) in the Chicagoland area, Alicia was raised Catholic but disagreed with much of the way sermons were taught growing up. Yet, still wanting to continue her relationship with God, she found her way to Barbwire Baptist. As Alicia notes, “it was like love everyone, right? They said everyone's included in this love. But you know, it didn't feel like everyone was included and so that's why I'm like, no not really. Because I remember going and being told by the pastors, ‘I love
everyone’. Well, except these (queer people specifically) people. They should change” (March 24, 2023).

Alicia, like many other younger Christians, critique Christianity for the oxymoronic nature that exists not only through this from of exclusion, but also for the notion that some people are inherently worth less when Jesus proclaimed to love all. Throughout its history, Christian communities have taken various forms, from small house churches to large congregations, but even more in recent years they have shifted to an exclusionary oxymoron where everyone is welcome if you act and think like we do. Though this is not the case for all Christian churches because most are welcoming to new ideals, women pastors, and the queer community. Following the Protestant reformation, the church itself became less about fostering community within worshippers to more about the church being defined by the preaching of the gospel. As theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546) expresses, to ‘believe in the church’ is not to express a trust in the church as an institution and the people but rather that by exalting the church as something called into being by the gospel that has a mission authorized from God (McGrath 2012). Therefore, for Luther the church is a community centered around the gospel hence no longer stressing the need for people in the collective, and because “the visible church is constituted by the preaching of the gospel: no human assembly may claim to be the ‘church of God’ unless it is founded in the gospel” (McGrath 2012:150). Yet, the gospels can be and are interpreted in many different ways by different groups.

This sentiment is expressly believed by those in higher positions of Barbwire Baptist. As pastor Jeremiah says, “We are orthodox Christian or fundamentalist, meaning we believe that from the apostolic age there has been a true form of Christianity, one that sees the bible as an all reliable source of God’s word and we here preach it as the truth, for me at least it’s what ties all
Christians together” (March 12, 2023). Ultimately, though there are conflicting messages about who is allowed to be a part of it, community is an obvious mechanism used to disseminate ideals among members of Barbwire Baptist. While the older members are able to spread ideals down the proverbial fish, younger members like Alicia are able to break away from the herd and shift away from outdated ideas recirculating among future generations and create a new set of disciples.

**Church 101 and The Creation of Disciples**

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19-20

Church 101 typically happens once every two months during regular service. In Church 101 new and perspective members are sequestered away from the rest of the congregation and given the opportunity to, as Pastor Jonah expressed; ‘root themselves deeper into what it means to be a follower of Christ’ (February 19, 2023). Church 101 acts as a crucial first step to membership at Barbwire Baptist, offering a glimpse behind the curtain to the men running the entire show. For this particular Church 101 session, pastor Jonah led the group in the same room where Discover was held while pastor Jeremiah led the main service downstairs in the main worship hall.

The main goal of the pastors at Barbwire Baptist, is to as Pastor Jonah expressed, ‘create disciples of Christ’ (February 19, 2023). By creating disciples, the head of youth ministry, Malcolm, told me “We want to make disciples of Christ. Like first Peter two says, like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk of the word. And so, like a little baby who's learning how
to feed themselves, we want to help our students learn how to feed themselves the Bible. How to feed themselves, the word of God, because that's what we're told to crave” (March 24, 2023). For members of Barbwire Baptist, both in roles of leadership and that of regular membership, discipleship is central to their practice of Christianity. Discipleship is not merely a title or a label; rather, it is an ongoing journey of transformation and spiritual growth.

The journey of discipleship is characterized by several key elements. First and foremost, it is a journey of faith. Disciples trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ and believe that He is the Son of God who offers forgiveness and eternal life. As pastor Jonah said during Church 101, “we have to look away from mere religion but to Jesus for he is your salvation, not works, nor false worship, it is striving for a better community that has faith in Jesus” (February 19, 2023). Faith is the foundation that creates and builds the relationship between disciples, God, and their community.

Discipleship is built heavily on members of Barbwire’s faith, because as Pastor Jeremiah expresses “it’s a constant thread, that comes from hearing the message of Christ” (March 12, 2023). But also, it involves a process of learning and growing in knowledge and understanding of God's Word, the Bible. After attending the required Church 101 courses, prospective members are then invited to attend bible study groups. Because of the personal nature of things discussed at said groups and the limited time spent during my participant observation, I unfortunately was not invited to formally attend one of the Bible study groups. But from communication with other members, I was able to learn that these groups are more than just where they discuss scripture, rather, they incorporate everything that happens in their everyday lives. These spaces act as places outside of the formal church setting, often where ideals of life are cemented by being surrounded by likeminded individuals. This dynamic was pervasive at Barbwire Baptist, where
the ability to even be a part of a group is contingent upon displaying to the pastors a relative amount of faith in Christ and willingness to move forward in the process of membership to the church fellowship.

The Church and the community play a vital role in discipleship, providing a place for worship, fellowship, and mutual support. As Pastor Jeremiah expressed during his sermon, “we don’t seek out people to join our flock, you’ll see no ads in papers or across radio waves, but yet our seats are always filled on Sunday. That’s because of the community we have here” (March 5, 2023). Discipleship is not a solitary pursuit but is best experienced within the context of a community of believers. Within the Church, disciples can learn from one another, receive guidance and accountability, and exercise their spiritual gifts for the benefit of others.

Ultimately, Barbwire Baptist members see community and discipleship as inseparable parts of their Christian faith and practice. For Barbwire Baptist, Christianity encompasses beliefs, teachings, and practices that all are centered on fostering a community level relationship with Jesus Christ. Where “Jesus is the eternal husband to the bride his church” (March 12, 2023). Overall, discipleship involves faith, learning, obedience, and community.

**Concluding Remark**

For Barbwire Baptist, Christianity and community are closely connected as believers are encouraged to show love and provide support to each other. In this chapter, I examined how through shared belief in Christianity, Barbwire Baptist displays a sense of community by emphasizing the importance of service and acceptance while covertly placing emphasis on a distinction within Christianity that separates women and the sexual other. By embracing the
teachings of Jesus, Christians can establish a united and welcoming community that embodies the principles of their faith. In the next chapter, I explore gendered images and symbols related to divinity and the role of women within the Barbwire Baptist church community.
CHAPTER 4
WHY HIM, NOT HER: IMAGES OF DIVINITY AND HOW BEST TO SERVE
“[…] there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
Galatians 3:28

This chapter explores the second theme uncovered through the research process. It explores how gendered ideals affect roles in the church and their representations through religious imagery. Throughout majority of my time sent at Barbwire Baptist, I paid particular attention to the decoration on the wall or rather the lack thereof. In my interview with pastor Jeremiah, I questioned this in reference to my own church experiences growing up. Growing up, in my home church we did not have big stained glass windows depicting Christ nor paintings on the wall, only bare off white walls like Barbwire. But in our supplementary texts that we read alongside our bibles often there were images of white Jesus and other white recounts of biblical stories. Though these were white images, we still saw a visual representation of the narratives we read. These visuals helped me visualize the stories as well as pay more attention as a young child. While I attended service, I often noticed many of the young children either not paying attention or playing around. When questioned about this, Jeremiah said “we don’t need to do any of that, I think our message gets across to those there and if it was really an issue the parents can send their kids to the child area with the younger children until service ends” (March 12, 2023). Even though they are of little importance to individuals within church leadership, religious images/symbols can in actuality convey concepts concerned with humanity's relationship to the sacred or holy (Augustine 2016)
Religion and Symbols

Symbols serve as important mechanisms for defining culture as they reinforce certain patterns of behavior transmitted from person to person (Hoskins 2015). Religious symbols are an integral part of many faiths, including Christianity. These symbols are used to express and communicate important beliefs, stories, and concepts that hold significance for members of the faith. The most prominent Christian symbol is the cross, which represents the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even at Barbwire Baptist, which claims to not rely on symbols to get across their message, a large cross adorns the wall directly behind the pastors as they deliver sermon. The cross is a powerful symbol of sacrifice, suffering, redemption, and hope, and has been used in Christian art and iconography for centuries. Symbols not only can be represented as physical objects, but also can take the form of relationships (e.g., gender and sexuality) subtly reinforcing accepted norms and influencing the dissemination of ideas.

In addition to religious symbolism, gendered symbols play an equally important role in how Christianity is perceived and disseminated. While there are varying interpretations and beliefs within Christianity about the roles and separations between men and women, often coming out of more progressive Christian communities, many Christians believe that God created humans as male and female, and that these genders have distinct yet complementary roles and responsibilities with respect to the church and the family on multiple scales. The most prominent symbols of men and women in Christianity are Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary (Jelly 1979). For most Christians, Jesus supposedly never marries nor fathers children; rather his family is the church and his children its congregation. Mary the mother represents an unachievable ideal/standard for Christians of both sexes, as opposed to other less idealized
figures which inhabit good qualities that people can emulate and imperfections that all people can learn from.

Solberg (2018) argues that for much of early Christianity, the sexuality and authority of women was a celebrated phenomenon within the church. Although Christian history persistently has focused on the loss of innocence in women, with the hypocritical push from the male leaders for them to be more and more hyper-sexual. Mary on the other hand seems to be the only woman who has grown purer and purer with each passing century. And because of this, women are bound by a social construct of unachievable virginity due to immaculate conception as Mary conceived ‘without any detriment to her virginity, which remained inviolate even after his birth’ (Council of the Lateran, 649). As Christianity spread, it shaped cultures what were celebrated later then used as a previable weapon to control women by their gender and sexuality. Even during the participant observation period of this study, this sentiment of Mary’s irrational virginity is shared among both men and women, particularly the older generation, at Barbwire Baptist. One member, an elderly woman named Susan at the ripe age of 80, and I briefly spoke after service one Sunday because of her interest in my research project. Susan expressed having been taught growing up that Mary was a virgin her entire life and that to be a good Christian girl she was to wait until she was married.

**Seeing gender through Barbwire**

Although the Bible teaches that all people are equal in God's eyes, many Christian communities still practice forms of gender discrimination that limit the roles and opportunities available to women and non-gender conforming men. Gender discrimination has been a prevalent issue in many religious communities throughout history. One of the most significant examples of gender discrimination in Christianity is the exclusion of women from leadership
roles within the church (Haskins 2003). Many sects of Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church and other sects like Barbwire Baptist, only allow men to serve as either pastor or church leaders, (i.e., a deacon or bishop).

This exclusion effectively denies women the opportunity to lead congregations and participate fully in religious life by essentially excluding them from religious interpretation. Much of this attitude stems from interpretations of two sources; the Genesis creation story and the Apostle Paul’s account in 1 Timothy. The former is where knowledge of the world is effectively stolen by Eve who goes ‘against’ the word of God, shifting Adam and the rest of the world into sin. This narrative follows much of Greco-Judeo Christian story/myth where women (aided by Satan) are seen as the source of all evil in the modern world. During its rise in popularity in the cultural and political world, Christianity shifted from a polytheistic system that saw and respected feminine divinity and Godhood to a monotheistic masculine system that has essentially all but removed any trace of feminine power in both realms of creation and distribution of knowledge. Despite this being reflective of the surrounding culture, smaller sects/cults within greater Christianity emerge like the cult of Mary within the Catholic church but these are few and far between.

The account of 1 Timothy has allowed Christians to believe that men and women have different yet complementary roles in the church, with men as leaders and women as supporters. In 1 Timothy 2:11-12 the Apostle Paul writes, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet." Yet other church leaders espouse a more egalitarian approach, where men and women are equal in their roles and responsibilities within the church. Pastor Jeremiah expressed:
“It’s not about equality nor competition, but rather completion. Men and women are supposed to be complementary; men are to lead, and women follow by his side” (March 12, 2023). Though many of the other members I spoke to in passing during participant observation appear to understand Barbwire Baptist and Christianity as egalitarian, I personally observed an overtly segregated system of leadership based on gender. For example, during our interview Malcolm explained:

“We have tons of ladies serving in the Children's ministry. We have tons of ladies serving in the Women's Ministry. We have women helping to lead Bible studies. In homes, there's so many things that women do that God has gifted them to do. That are just as good as the things that God has given men to do. The one thing that God says that a woman should not do is take that position of spiritual leadership and authority” (March 24, 2023).

Despite these differing beliefs, gender remains an important and often controversial topic within Christianity. Some church members argue that gender roles are rooted in biblical teachings and should be upheld. For example, one woman referred to here as Ruth, a middle-aged congregant in her late 40s or early 50s (she wouldn’t directly say because as she said, “it’s rude to ask,” so I didn’t press the matter) with sad but kind eyes who has been a member at Barbwire Baptist for roughly 5 years after her son joined argued, during our interview over lunch that:

“Women are certainly more welcome in every congregation and so on. Whereas years ago, back in the day, it wasn't really like that. […] but do I think that women should be pastors. I would have to say no. I think God takes a clear line on that and I may not understand that. But I do believe that God, is correct, and made women for different things” (May 25, 2023)

Others argue that it is important to recognize the diversity of gender identities and expressions within society. As Alicia expressed “my parents swapped roles at home for a little bit […], but even when they were switched roles, you still saw those rigid gender structures, even though like they weren't doing what was assigned to their gender” (May 17, 2023). Overall, gender has a profound influence over religious symbols that are important aspects of
Christianity. Both continue to shape the beliefs and practices of members at Barbwire Baptist. While there may be differing opinions and interpretations on these topics, they remain an important part of the faith and its traditions.

In some cases, women are allowed to serve in leadership roles within the church and in their own households but are relegated to secondary positions such as choir director and overseeing daycare during service, rather than in positions of true authority or decision-making power. This practice reinforces the idea that women are not fit to lead and perpetuates gender stereotypes, especially the belief that women should submit to men. This belief is often based on certain passages in the Bible that appear to endorse male authority over women. For example, during our interview pastor Jeremiah referenced the following scripture, "wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:22-24). This passage and others like it have been used to justify the idea that women should be subservient to men and that men have the right to make all decisions. This interpretation has effectively silenced women's voices and prevented them from fully participating in religious life. Often it is younger congregants like Alicia that go against reductive narratives such as this and see women and other marginalized individuals as worthy of having an equal say and are worthy of being equally represented.

**Barbwire holding us together or keeping us apart: Representation and Religion**

Christianity as one of the world's largest religions, with well over 2 billion followers worldwide is said to be representative of the diversity of the world. While this may be true of other parts, Barbwire Baptist is not as a reflective as it would hope to appear, with a majority white cis-gender heterosexual congregation. True representation of the world is not as important;
for Barbwire Baptist, as Christianity and even church leadership would make it seem. Because of its long and complex history with diverse ranges of beliefs, practices, and traditions. Diversity and representation is reflected in the way that Christianity is practiced around the world. At its core, Christianity is a religion that is centered around the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, where people from all backgrounds and walks of life are brought together through shared identity in/through faith.

One of the primary challenges when it comes to diversity and representation in Christianity is the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. As pastor Jeremiah noted, “white people and the spread of Christianity did not help the bible. In many cases they hurt it. People indirectly have a lot of hate and pain directed at Christ because of it” (March 12, 2023). For many centuries, Western powers have used Christianity as a tool to colonize and control other parts of the world. In many cases, this involved imposing Western religious and cultural practices on indigenous peoples, often at the expense of their own traditions and beliefs. “[T]he material culture of mission work literally substituted for the places and people among whom missionaries were laboring, while simultaneously demonstrating the triumphant message of the worldwide spread of Christianity” (Hasinoff 2011:107). Today, many Christians from non-Western backgrounds continue to struggle with the legacy of this colonial past. They feel excluded or marginalized within Christian communities that are dominated by Western voices, often because biblical narratives are heavily alerted to be politically manipulative and oppress the poor, needy and feminine (Howitt 2002). And ultimately act as a form of ‘Christian neocolonialism’ (Howitt 2002) that permeates into all facets of modernity.

However, despite this shared belief in Jesus Christ, Christianity is far from homogeneous. In fact, there are many different denominations and traditions within Christianity, each with its
own unique beliefs and practices. Regardless of diversity of believers reflected in the racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of Christians around the world, Christianity has been dominated by white, Western voices, with people of color and other marginalized groups often excluded or sidelined (Howitt 2002). Christianity as a global religion, has been adopted and adapted by people from many different cultures and backgrounds (McLaughlin 2019, Jenkins 2009). Though other forms of Christianity see this diversity and celebrate it, however, Barbwire Baptist is representative of the challenges still surrounding representation and inclusion within Christianity.

**Concluding Remark**

Ultimately, Christianity has been characterized by patriarchal structures and beliefs, with women often excluded or marginalized within the church. This sentiment was expressed by Ruth during our interview when she expressed, “[…] you know I feel like one of God’s children, but as someone who’s divorce, a mother without a daughter, I don’t always feel represented. I guess my square peg syndrome of whatever comes out” (May 25, 2023). For women like Ruth, who don’t expressly fit into biblical narratives of what a woman is supposed to be, to have, and to act often ostracize themselves because women like them are not celebrated. In the end, it is the job of everyone working to challenge these structures and promote gender equality within Christianity and find ways to encourage and incorporate everyone regardless of race, gender, or sexuality. In the next chapter, I discuss the final theme observed, how members understand the relationship between sexuality and morality.
CHAPTER 5  
SEX AND CELIBACY: SEXUALITY, DESIRE, AND POWER

“For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”  
Ephesians 5:5

This chapter discusses the final theme observed, which explored the relationship between sexuality and morality for members of Barbwire Baptist. Though much of this thesis is centered around the nature of gender and gender performativity, erasing any conversation of sexuality would be an act of ‘academic arrogance’ (Lorde 1984). Members of Barbwire Baptist tend to see both gender and sexuality as connected and as such each is deserving of study in this research.

Sexuality is a complex and multifaceted aspect of human existence, and it has been the subject of discussion, debate, and strife within Christianity for centuries. Christianity has a long and troubled history when grappling with issues related to sex and sexuality. Often the ways it has approached these issues have varied over time and across different denominations. From the perspective of using Black Feminist Theory to critique and understand religion, allows for critical lens such as intersectionality (and queerness) to provide a basis for analysis and critiques societal and political norms; in particular, as they relate to the experience of sexuality and gender. As White (2020) notes:

“Crucially, what is viewed as appropriately feminine is not only defined in relation to maleness or masculinity, but through numerous intersections of power including race, sexuality, ability, and social class. In other words, white, heterosexual, binary gender conforming, able-bodied, and upper- or middle-class femininity is privileged in relation to other varieties. Any social system may contain multiple femininities that differ in status, and which relate to each other as well as to masculinity” (White 2020).
Overall, by situating religious studies in conversation with Black Feminist and gender theorist scholars can perceive gender as a socially constructed public and political affair, as gender theorists argue regarding sexual and gender expression.

**Sexual Morality**

One of the primary concerns of Christianity with regards to sexuality has been the question of sexual morality. During our interview together pastor Jeremiah and I discussed the nature of sin and regarding sexuality he expressed, “homosexuality has become the monstrous sin versus adultery and any other sin, when in reality we should not condemn it as such. We all sin and all are in need of a savior” (March 12, 2023). From the earliest days of the Church, Christians have sought to understand what it means to live a virtuous life, and this has included considerations of how to behave sexually. As another interviewee Jake, a 23-year-old member of Barbwire Baptist who is friends with Alicia, told me, “[…] I think you can be gay and be a Christian - because being straight is not what saves you. Which means being gay is not what lose you or doesn't save you or makes you not Christian. Just like you can be a Christian and be a lot of things” (March 8, 2023).

Overall, Christians, especially members of Barbwire Baptist tend to view sex as a gift from God that is meant to be enjoyed within the specific context of marriage (between men and women). Even Malcolm expressed:

For someone who is of homosexual orientation. They can be a Christian and they can be living a holy life as a Christian. Because they aren't doing the activities that the Bible calls sinful. Which is then to say that they live a celibate life. They're not gonna be able to reject or deny who they are, even if they're gay. Then I mean, what are they going to do? Lie to everyone? Say no, I'm straight! You know, I'm attracted to women now, but it's a lie. And they would know it's a lie and that would just be wrong. Not supposed to lie, right? So, but I think if someone who is homosexual comes to know the Lord Jesus and then reads the word and they read that God wants them to be holy in their life. And flee from sexual immorality. I think that they could. Then joyfully choose to be single and celibate (April 19, 2023).
This view is rooted in the biblical account of creation, which portrays sex as a part of the divine plan for human flourishing.

For Barbwire Baptist, the key source of guidance, as for most Christians, on matters of sexual morality is the Bible. One of the most important of these passages for most Christians is the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, which portrays sex as an integral part of the marital relationship. The Bible is what they consider the absolute truth to answer any questions of sexuality. When discussing the topic of sexuality, pastor Jeremiah expressed a bit of conflict. During our interview, I could see the struggle on his face between what his faith dictates and the feelings in his heart. Because this story contains information about a child's experience with sexuality I have chosen to not include specific information. He went on to explain that a member of his personal family was having questions surrounding sexuality, and though pastor Jeremiah expressed great love for them, he said he felt conflicted by what the bible said versus the love in his heart.

Despite the importance of the Bible in shaping Christian views on sexuality, there has also been a recognition throughout history that the interpretation of biblical texts is not always straightforward. Even church officials like Jeremiah have said, “Though the bible is the all reliable word of God, it is not without critique. Especially when transcribed from copy to copy, into a multitude of languages, it’s not uncommon to see inconsistencies. English translations aren’t perfect” (March 12, 2023). Because of the inconsistencies of translation, different Christians have read the same passages in different ways that have led to a diversity of views on sexual morality. For example, Alicia who identifies as bi-sexual, believes that since God created man and woman to be equal so showed they be loved equally.
Sex and Culture

Another factor that has influenced Christian views on sexuality are the broader cultural contexts in which Christianity has existed and been adopted throughout the ages. Throughout history, the prevailing attitudes towards sex and sexuality have varied widely, and this has had an impact on the ways in which Christians have thought about these issues. For example, in the Middle Ages, dominant Christian attitudes in Europe and the surrounding world towards sex were heavily influenced by the philosophy of Aristotle, which emphasized the importance of moderation and self-control. This led to a view of sex as primarily a means of procreation, rather than a source of pleasure or intimacy. And if these relationships are not hetero-normative, then they should not exist as one Malcolm; the youth pastor, remarked:

I think that someone can be completely satisfied and fulfilled in life without sexual activity. I see that in the scripture, I see that the apostle Paul was fully OK with being single and devoting his life to serving the Lord in the context. That the Lord brought him to, and he literally says under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, [...] I wish more people were like this because they could then serve the Lord just as much. I think it's the Holy Spirit that would direct him to write that. And I think what they're trying to help us to see that sexual realization is not the fullest calling of a human being. I really don't think it is. I think it's that we would know Christ and all his fullness. I think that's what gives truth. I mean, how many people could you maybe think of who express themselves sexually in however they want, but yet they are not fully satisfied in life or content. And they're always just seeking further and further things.

He continues:

And I just think of Colossians chapter one, it says. Christ, being the image of the Invisible God. The first born of all creation by him, all things were made. Without him was not anything made that was made and it says that in him, all things hold together. And it says that. All things were created through him. And for him. So, like we will always feel like something is missing. As long as Jesus is missing. In our lives because. We could chase after and find satisfaction and pleasure in a million other ways sexually, including in that. But that's not what we were created for. We were created to know Christ so I think that there's a certain worship of sexual identity that's happening in our culture. Where people think that, that is the most important thing about you. And I would just say that the most important thing about you is not that, it's not your sexual identity or experiences. The most important thing about you is are you fully treasuring and satisfied in Jesus Christ (April 19, 2023).
In a community that condemns all things considered unclean, church leadership at Barbwire Baptist through sermon exhibit a strict adherence to ideals that even they deem outdated, which ultimately leave their members stuck in a limbo-like space where they are firmly in the present but also stuck in the past, reproducing antiquated notions of what it means to be and act Christian.

As stated earlier in Chapter 2, distinguishing between sex and gender has become an important issue of study. Broadly during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s, the mainstream United States culture saw a challenging of traditional ideas and behaviors. Though it was not fully embraced through all facets of life, it showed a desire to revolutionize the way sex was viewed and experienced. And as the world slowly changed, some Christian attitudes towards sex were challenged and revolutionized in a way that side stepped traditional views of sexuality and led to slight increase in acceptance of premarital sex, contraception, and even homosexuality. Even with the shift in sexual freedom, communities like Barbwire Baptist hold tightly to a more conservative ‘traditionalist’ attitude towards sex and sexuality. Notably, though it is never outright expressed but silently eluded to during my interviews with church leadership, if your sexual acts do not produce a physical manifestation (a child) then it should not be done. In the end these are the ideals being passed down to younger generations. As Malcom notes,

I'm not saying that sex is not a blessing from God. And that is not a good thing. Right, I'm not. I'm not arguing that, but I'm just saying that the reason that I brought that up, the whole aspect of celibacy, because it is something that He expressed. Whether or not, Homosexual straight whatever, regardless, it's that aspect of celibacy versus what Scripture says (April 19, 2023).
Overall, these conflicting views have led to a disagreement between members of Barbwire Baptist that has caused some to become more permissive in their views on sexual morality while others have become more conservative.

**Concluding Remark**

In conclusion, for members of Barbwire Baptist sexuality and religion have a long and complex history, and it is clear especially from the information presented early in this chapter that they have often been intertwined in ways that can be both beneficial and harmful. In the end, recognizing that there are still many issues to explore and work through is essential for members of Barbwire Baptist. The younger generations must remember that sexuality is a natural and essential part of being human, and that all people have the right to express themselves in whatever way feels most comfortable and authentic. Ultimately, it is up to individuals to decide how they will navigate the intersection of sexuality and religion. The next chapter will be used to summarize the overall findings of this study.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Through my research, I discovered that the complex relationship between gender, sexuality, and religion manifests in the various ways in which religious beliefs shape, and are shaped by, attitudes towards gender and sexual behavior. The members of Barbwire Baptist serve as examples of the contradiction of praxis, they are governed by ideals that for some are rarely actually put into practice. As such any focus on human gendered and sexual relations becomes an important means of understanding the ways people express and interpret cultural meanings about the body (Hacking 2007). People’s willingness to conform to or diverge from dominant social norms and expectations with respect to gender and sexuality is the deciding factor in their daily expression. These expressions are key to understanding how people’s sense of dignity, material worth, and life opportunities are interconnected. Moreover, my thesis offers a glimpse into the lives of people who try to embody contrary ideas in the modern world.

The interviewed members of Barbwire Baptist, whose experiences and views are discussed in this thesis study, serve as examples of the contradiction of praxis. These individuals are governed by ideals that for some are rarely actually put into practice, as are all humans who are flawed complex beings (Dewey 2011; Sorrells and Nakagawa 2008). For some older members, there is a clear correlation in what scripture dictates and the actions that depicts a level of indoctrination that repeats and reproduces problematic narratives that create a distinct separation in authority between men and women. In contrast, some younger members recognize the shortcomings in biblical teachings and in seeking a meaningful relationship with Christ, choose to believe in and go out of their way to have a true separation between what
church leadership and on one hand, the Bible says and how they chose to govern themselves on the other hand. Ultimately, members of Barbwire Baptist exist within a social construct that regulates and exerts control over pleasure, interpersonal relationships, and individual ideas and practices of personhood.

This thesis was a preliminary study that drew on gender studies and the theoretical frames of Black Feminist Theory and the anthropology of Christianity as guiding frameworks while also employing ethnographic techniques. I selected these frameworks because they allowed for a bottom-up approach that highlights lived religious experience, which is crucial to understanding the dissemination of ideas across generations. As someone who has experienced a different form of Christianity my entire life, it was difficult throughout both the research and writing process to separate my own understandings and feelings from that of my participants and to draft a document that was independently reflective of my time spent with the members of Barbwire Baptist. As stated earlier in this study, combining these frameworks allows researchers to investigate the intersections of religion, gender, and sexuality.

Limitations and Future Areas of Research

Due to time constraints I was only able to gain partial insight into the much deeper and complex question of how ideals of gender performativity and sexuality are transmitted intergenerationally among the members of a church-based Christian community. Because of the gaps in my knowledge after concluding this study, I plan to revisit members of Barbwire Baptist in the future to possibly further investigate the topics discussed in this study. I plan to explore other topics concerning lived gospel experience, which is essential as it could help supplement gaps in academia overall and this study specifically. Nonetheless, I was able to collect data on
themes including community, how gendered perceptions affect the roles allowed with the church, and lastly the relationship between sexuality and morality.

During my fieldwork, the most prominent challenge came in creating my interview guides and discerning and dissecting the differences between gender and sexuality. In attempting to fully explore the nuance of these topics during the research process, I often found myself struggling to accurately express these nuances during the writing process. During interviews members often assumed that sexuality and gender were the same thing, so most times I found myself having to either rephrase/remove questions or have entire follow-up interviews. Like any other research project, there are limitations due to time, access, and life. All the participants, including myself, work jobs and live busy lives that had to take precedent in some cases over the needs of this study. As a result, some lines of research pathways had to be abandoned and some interviews could not be completed.

Furthermore, I hope that the takeaway from this thesis is that while Religion is an important factor in how gender roles and expectations of sexuality are constructed (Goffman 1963), traditional views of gender and sexuality have been, and should continue to be challenged. Though older generations at Barbwire Baptist are the seat of information, younger generations are seeing the world through bright eyes and changing it for the better.
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APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE
Interview Question Guide

Before Interview begins:

- Obtain Informed Consent (Verbal and Written)
- Explain Length of Interview  Begin Interview Questions:

1. Can you introduce yourself?
   - Any Demographic information
     - Gender Identity
     - Age
     - Race
     - Legal status
     - LGBTQ+
     - Really anything they are willing to share about their own identity.

2. How long have you been a member of the church?
   - What role do you play in the church
   - Do you just attend weekly meetings
   - Are you active within the church and what does that mean.

3. What do you think is the most important aspect(s) of Christianity (to you)?

4. What makes you a strong believer in Christianity?

5. Do you see the other church members as family, and Why?

6. Does family extend to all people, or does it stop just at members of the church?
7. What are some of the symbols of your religion and what do they represent?

8. How do you feel about issues such as premarital sex, intermarriage, teen pregnancy, and divorce?

9. What’s your understanding of scripture? Is it up for interpretation or no?

10. What is your view on same-sex marriages or homosexuality?

11. Where do you think these ideals come from? Family, church or other?

12. What makes a good Christian man/woman?

13. Do you think people have moved away from what the bible teaches?

14. Do you have any questions for me?