PERFORMING GENDER SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY: RE-CONSTITUTING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AS MASCULINE

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I scan my shoes.

Nude pumps: traditional.
Red flats: cute and practical.
Yellow heels: flashy.
Black Toms: comfy and philanthropic.

I’ll be speaking to ministry types. And I wonder...do my male colleagues spend this much time getting dressed? Debating how their shoes will impact their credibility? How their appearance will affect others’ attention? Why is there no way to be an “unmarked” woman? Especially in ministry, where being a woman alone sets me apart.

Silencing my questions, I stride away, my feet a blur of neon yellow.1

...It makes me sad. It hurts to know they very well might think I’m sinning by following what I sincerely believe to be my God-given passions. In truth, it often frustrates me that people think it’s wrong for me to preach – simply because I’m a woman.2

...Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence.3

From flashy heels to deep-gendered pain, these bloggers attempt to reconcile two identities often conceived of as adversative: spiritual, authority wielding pastors who happen to be women. “I am a pastor—but I am also a daughter [and]...a mother” writes a commenter on Preaching Today.4 The notion that women pastoring requires grammatical intervention suggests pastors are naturally and normally not women. Yet, women do exercise spiritual authority in many Christian circles. Reconsidering the online pastors’ comments about gender, another facet of spiritual authority emerges. For one blogger, the feminine activity of worrying about one’s gender performance—in this case, what shoes to wear—is central to the meaning of authority and legitimacy. So, rather than investigating women’s spiritual authority, this paper investigates the role gendered performances play in constituting spiritual authority.

The literature often gives us two types of answers. One, women as pastors necessarily expand the typically-masculine category of spiritual authority because of the inherent or socialized differences between men and women that manifest in appearance, voice and/or experience. These answers often suggest that woman exercising spiritual authority in a naturally different way does not challenge the integrity of Biblical womanhood. Two, the greatest difference is between individual pastoring styles, not gender, and thus women’s performance of spiritual authority statically confirms the varied content of spiritual authority. Both types of answers suggest that

3 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.
women’s pastoring performances at the pulpit or in the pews confirms that spiritual authority can be exercised by women. Of course, there are studies that argue that women should not exercise spiritual authority, but these studies are outside the scope of this paper. I find both answers incomplete. Rather, this paper investigates how gendered performances of spiritual authority cement that authority as masculine. Using Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity as a regulatory practice, I argue that, on the one hand, women pastors enacting spiritual authority do challenge the content of what counts as spiritual authority; and, on the other hand, their gendered performances are subject to intense regulation that re-constitutes spiritual authority as masculine.

I explore questions of performance, differences and regulation by interviewing six women (Ashley, Miriam, Olga, Hilda, Hope, and Maria). These women’s insights convey a thoughtful and emotional engagement with the challenges of exercising spiritual authority often in the face of opposition. The six interviews must be read as a constellation with each individual story, both discernible and amalgamated, into the larger assemblage of regulated gendered spiritual authority.

This paper will unfold as follows. First, I will explore Butler’s conception of gender as performance, as well as explore the vast literature on women pastors, difference, and performance. Second, I outline my methods and case selection in greater detail. Third, I explore three themes: calling as a speech act, de-gendering as regulation and difference as performance. I conclude by suggesting that reformulating spiritual authority performances as regulation suggests that future research could, one, compare gender regulation between men and women; and, two, excavate those people exercising spiritual authority without resting on a binary understanding of gender/sex and masculinity/femininity.

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5 All the women’s names are replaced with pseudonyms.

Performing gendered spiritual authority: a tale of regulation

The concept of performativity has pervaded diverse scholarly investigations, including the study of seemingly subversive acts performed by women pastors exercising spiritual authority. While not all scholars engage with Butler’s theory of performativity, all under review do engage with the question of whether or not women exercising spiritual authority challenge or confirm the content of acceptable spiritual authority. Some conclude that women confirm that spiritual authority accepts women. More commonly, scholars argue that women’s performance challenge the masculine content of spiritual authority. This paper innovates on existing literature to suggest that women pastors are and feel subjected to intense regulatory practices that are not tangential to their gendered performance, but rather are constitutive of that performance.

Butler developed the theory of gender performativity in 1990 in her book Gender Trouble. Engaging in what Butler terms a “genealogical critique,” Butler refuses to search for the inner truth of female difference and rather pinpoints how gender is “the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.” Using the language of compulsory heterosexuality, Butler attends to the way the social world is organized to compel men and women to enter heterosexual relationships. The mechanism of compliance is the organization of people in heteronormative categories of sex, also known as the male/female binaries based on reproductive compatibility. Gender and sex are not truths outside action, but rather totally constituted through “the repeated stylization of

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8 Butler, Gender Trouble, xxxi.
the body...within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance. Performativity is relational and requires interaction with an audience that can read or misread one’s acts. In this case, it involves the women preaching from the pulpit and the congregation listening. The theory also makes us pay attention to the everyday gendered acts as those acts—wearing lipstick, picking yellow heels, etc.—confirm and obscure the highly regulated gendered performances that reinforce oppressive regimes, such as compulsory heterosexuality or male dominance. While I propose Butler’s framework to uncover the regulation that reconstitutes spiritual authority as masculine, it is important to examine the literature that inspired my investigation into women’s pastoring performances.

Some scholars investigating women’s preaching and its relationship to spiritual authority suggest that women do not radically alter the definition of spiritual authority because spiritual authority is neither masculine nor feminine. Indeed, Royle (1982) finds no statistical differences between women and men pastors in terms of the number of congregation members and financial support and thus concludes that women are largely accepted as pastors. While Royle does suggest that women may face legitimacy issues, the statistical evidence suggests these women must have easily overcome issues of non-acceptance. What Royle leaves unspoken is why one would expect women to face additional struggles. The unspoken premise of the argument suggests that spiritual authority is gendered masculine and women pastors are feminine gatecrashers and thus scholars would expect women to face some exclusion. Finding none, Royle implies scholars may be misreading how spiritual authority is gendered.

Current literature suggests that women pastors do indeed challenge the masculine definition of spiritual authority. Here, spiritual authority is traditionally conceptualized as masculine and women as pastors challenge this definition. The types of answers fall along a spectrum. On the one side, scholars argue that women’s differences are biological; on the other hand, scholars argue that women’s differences are due to socialization. Many of the arguments fall in between. What this literature indicates is that gender matters when studying protestant practices of spiritual authority.

Those who argue that women pastor differently because they are ‘naturally’ predisposed to a more personal mode of leadership, subsequently claim that these naturally deviant pastors are positively changing spiritual authority to include a more human perspective. I offer the following overstated logic to outline this point: women, by virtue of god-given sexual differences, will biologically and automatically pastor in more relational and personal ways. These potential mothers have a predisposition for caring. If the language of naturalness makes you uncomfortable, you are not alone. However, these arguments importantly contest theses that argue women are naturally unfit for leadership. This paper does not entertain these arguments, but it is important to note that scholars under review who suggest women are naturally different than men also argue that traditionally masculine forms of spiritual authority should normatively be expanded to include women.

9 Butler, Gender Trouble, 45.

13 Ibid.
Closely related to the arguments about natural differences are scholars who argue that a combination of inherent and learned traits create gender difference. Lawless (2003) convincingly argues that “women in the pulpit shift the religious subject and challenge the male-identified religious master narrative by their presence, voice, and experience.” Indeed, Lawless, like other scholars, conceptualized these factors as pushing the boundaries of naturalness and socialization, floating in between the two. Lawless does not spell out the logic behind the natural/cultural ambiguity of presence, voice, and experience, but I think it is akin to Nancy Hartsock’s (1983) conceptualization of women’s experience as an epistemological tool. Hartsock’s logic goes as follows: institutions define women’s activities as subsistence labour and childrearing and confine the definition of women to these activities because they have or appear to have the biological capacity for reproduction. Institutional definition (for example, in early childhood socialization) and entrapment (reducing womanhood to the female capacity to reproduce) necessarily produce a distinct female experience. Female experience or voice is, then, neither reducible to nature (female as child bearer) nor culture (woman as social construct). For Lawless and others, women are indeed different and that difference challenges what constitutes spiritual authority.

Another variation of this argument suggests that women need to reject their femininity to be accepted within masculine spiritual authority. Charlton (2000) found that women often downplayed their gendered identity in order to gain acceptance because the field of ministry is organized by men, for men. Arguing that fundamentalism rose in response to feminine performances of preaching, Maddux (2012) suggests that women may opt to strategically reject so-called feminine emotional and embodied styles to gain acceptance. In these cases, there is an assumed gender difference that is conceptualized as dangerous, toxic or unprofessional. By obscuring their differences, women opt for the possibility of acceptance.

Suggesting less ambiguity, several scholars discuss the role socialization plays in challenging the masculine space of spiritual authority. For example, Finlay (1996) argues women ministers are more likely to support abortion because, since spiritual authority is typically received of as masculine, women who pursue ministry are often more progressive. Dudley (1996) very clearly argues that a competent woman has the capacity to challenge the congregation’s ideas about women and get them to accept women as pastors. Others suggest that women necessarily pastor differently because of socio-economic factors like gendered childcare responsibilities or the social constructions of gender. Difference is thus constructed by various factors.

Scholars have found that gender difference perhaps does challenge what falls under the purview of spiritual authority. Several studies have found women tend to be more liberal, supporting political involvement in social

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justice programs and supporting abortion. While these scholars disagree on why women and men differ, the one thing these scholars have in common is that they find a gender difference that arguably challenges men as sole authorities in the church.

What these scholars miss in their investigation of women exercising spiritual authority is how women’s performance is integral to the regulation of gender norms. Indeed, the attempts to de-gender or perform feminine difference actually reconstitute masculine spiritual authority, rather than challenge it. This regulation of gender performativity is integral to the constitution of spiritual authority. One aspect of regulation is the way it creates identity. Butler asks: “to what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject?” The answer, for Butler, is that the regulation of performative acts is one’s identity; indeed, the subject does not exist outside the regulatory performance. Rejecting the very existence of subjectivity is radical and quite difficult and, in this paper, not essential to grasping the importance of performativity and regulation.

Even so, scholars often downplay Butler’s discussion of regulatory regimes. Perhaps, those thinking about clergywomen do not want to consider compulsory heterosexuality. However, Butler is concerned with many regulatory regimes. Regulatory regimes can be as vast as the total organization of sexuality (compulsory heterosexuality) or as seemingly infinitesimal as dictating attire. While compulsory heterosexuality regulates spiritual authority performed by women, the women in this study indicate in their actions and feelings that spiritual authority is regulated through speech acts, de-gendering, and emphasizing femininity. All of these mechanisms confirm spiritual authority as masculine and these women become interlopers in this re-masculinised space as they perform appropriate femininity or de-gendered authority.

**Interviewing Clergywomen in Edmonton, Alberta**

Taking performativity seriously, it is important to use methods that reflect the relationality of performativity. To capture the intersection of doing and watching, scholars have polled the congregation or engaged in participant observation. Alternatively, Bammert (2010) suggests that one must read the performative acts in relation to the community. In this case, I opted to interview women in Edmonton, Alberta, as previous studies have suggested that women enacting spiritual authority in conservative contexts will be starker in relation to socially conservative ideas. I will briefly detail why women in Alberta deserve attention from religious scholars and justify the methods I used to capture performativity.

Not much literature explores clergywomen in Alberta, despite Alberta’s long history of conservatism. Elected in 1935, right-wing party the Social Credit’s uninterrupted reign until 1971 began the domination of conservative
parties in Alberta, although the current ruling dynasty—the Progressive Conservatives—have shifted away from far right social policies\textsuperscript{31} and focused on neoliberal and fiscally conservative policies.\textsuperscript{32} While Alberta is considered the most socially and politically right-wing province in Canada, Adams (2003) argues that it cannot be compared to the more intense form of conservativeness in the southern states in the United States because the degree of socially conservative attitudes evident in Alberta’s public opinion matched Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, while there may be contradictory evidence that defines Alberta’s degree of conservativeness, it is within this ambiguity that women as pastors enact spiritual authority.

Just as provinces in Canada vary in degree of conservatism, so do Christian denominations. In this case, I chose women from Protestant churches that varied in degree of conservatism. On one end of the spectrum, one church only allowed women to act as leading pastors if they were married to the male leader of the church. On the other end of the spectrum, one church allows women or sexual minorities to unequivocally hold leadership positions. Excluded from this study, of course, are churches that argue that Biblical sex differences do not allow women to hold leadership positions in the church. The latter end of the spectrum confirms what Gallagher (2004) argues: clergywomen must reject the strict social conservatism that rests on notions of Biblical inerrancy because it does not allow women to have spiritual authority over men.\textsuperscript{34} The former end of the spectrum confirms arguments made by evangelical feminists in the 1960s and 1970s: women can be both theologically conservative, believing in the inerrancy of Scripture, while maintaining gender egalitarianism.\textsuperscript{35} Where relevant, I note how the clergywoman’s performance engages with this spectrum to answer how gendered performance and regulation constitute spiritual authority.

I employed three research methods: interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. As a feminist, interviews take seriously the lived realities of women.\textsuperscript{36} Interviews are also tools best suited to understand clergywomen’s subjective experiences. To capture women’s outward performances, I also attended church services where each of the women preached and, where possible, interviewed them in their offices at work. To analyze the interviews and participant observation notes, I used a three step discourse analysis. First, I read through the documents and looked for themes. Second, I examine the documents in relation to the secondary literature. Third, I read through the interviews and ethnographic notes once more to ensure the analysis was comprehensive. I received ethics clearance from the University of Alberta.

I chose to interview women in Edmonton, Alberta, at the exclusion of clergywomen in other large cities or rural areas for two reasons. One, the clergywomen in this study are a diverse sample. Two, focusing on a more specific geography offered an opportunity for richer comparison. Edmonton is also a unique environment because, while it is quite conservative compared to many other major cities in Canada, it is considered more liberal than other major cities in Alberta.

I found these women by searching online. This excludes churches without a strong online presence and lay-laid churches. The interviews were semi-structured. In other words, I asked

\textsuperscript{31} Social conservatives favour traditional institutions and family structures and often include anti-abortion and anti-gay marriage claims.
\textsuperscript{32} Fiscal conservatives argue for the reduction of debt and limited spending.
\textsuperscript{36} Cynthia Enloe, \textit{Nimo’s War, Emma’s War} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
similar questions to all the women, but the exact content varied based on the flow of the conversation. I started each interview by asking about her journey to this current moment.

I interviewed six women. Three of the women are ordained: Miriam, Hilda and Maria. Miriam is a pastor at a United Church. Hilda is the lead pastor at a bilingual Lutheran church. Maria pastors part-time at a Protestant church. Three of the women interviewed were comparatively new to ministry: Ashley, Olga and Hope. Not an ordained pastor, Ashley preaches occasionally at a Protestant church. Maria is informally mentoring Ashley. Olga is a pastor-in-training at a Lutheran church on a one-year stay in Canada from Germany. Olga is in a formal mentorship relationship with Hilda. All five women mentioned preach at liturgical churches, meaning that the church service uses a customary order of service and material that is historically derived. Hope identifies as both a pastor and a pastor’s wife at a non-denominational evangelical, non-liturgical church.

This study is personally important. As an active practitioner and as a feminist deeply concerned with Christian women’s issues, I necessarily situate myself as an insider. The church services I attended were familiar. I am also personally connected through friends with a few women in the study. Being conscious of my insider status, personal investment and personal connections, I also recognize myself as an outsider. Neither an attendee nor member of any of the churches, I occupied this liminal space of both familiar insider and analytical outsider. Looking at the personal investment, one may argue that I compromised the possibility for objectivism. However, by recognizing my own liminal situatedness, I operationalize Sandra Harding’s term “strong objectivity.”

Harding (1991) suggests that we need to recognize that all research is socially situated and informed by individual researcher’s biases, interests, and goals. Recognizing one’s social baggage is quite important for interviews and participant observation. By placing my body in the pews on Sunday or in their office on a weekday, I become part of the study. Strong objectivity goes further to include the non-hegemonic voices. I attempted to achieve this by searching out women in various clergy positions from part-time and full-time, larger congregations to smaller congregations, younger and older, and individually-led or team-led. However, these women may represent somewhat of a hegemonic voice as each are from popular denominations in Alberta and each woman is white. Acknowledging the degrees of diversity, the subsequent section explores the women’s narratives through three themes (speech acts, de-gendering and emphasizing femininity).

Speech acts: called to be not feminists?

While performance is more than words, central to the women in this study were various poignant phrases or speech acts that define their role as clergywomen. A great example of a performative speech act is saying “I do” in a marriage ceremony. Uttering those two words, with the appropriate audience present, change one’s status from unmarried to married and, in that way, the phrase augments existence. Performative speech acts are integral to many Christian rituals including, “I baptize you,” “I pronounce you husband and wife,” and “I christen you.” These words not only constitute the husband and wife, for example, the phrases also delineate spiritual authority as only those with the appropriate authority can perform such

\[38\] Ibid.

ceremonies and say such words.\textsuperscript{40} One can also expand these so-called “explicit” speech acts to include almost any word or phrase.\textsuperscript{41} Specifically, if one takes Butler’s theory of gender performativity seriously, all manners of speech are performative. There are two themes of performative speech acts explicated in the interviews: the language of calling and the rejection or caution of feminism.

The women in this study often used the very language of calling when discussing their career path. For example, Hope was called with her husband to ministry. As well, Ashley blogged about her calling and her battle to fulfill that calling. This confirms much of the literature’s evidence that women use the language of calling, often more than men.\textsuperscript{42} Strategically, women may use the language of calling to downplay possible ambitious intentions.\textsuperscript{43} Who can argue against a deity’s voice, in this case, God’s calling? Stating “I am called” constitutes women’s performance of spiritual authority legitimate, while simultaneously communicating that their intentions are not to be feared. The importance of calling is how it performs a type of spiritual justification. It rationalizes and excuses women’s desires to enact spiritual authority and reframe a woman’s choice as a godly obligation.\textsuperscript{44} While finding that the women in this study use the language of calling confirms what previous scholars have found, it is nonetheless significant to consider how clergywomen’s use of calling is highly regulatory as it subdues any transgressive behaviour of a woman enacting spiritual authority.

Another linguistic performance was the total rejection or hesitant caution towards naming oneself a feminist. Identifying as a feminist sends the exact opposite message of the language of calling. Feminists are considered, by some, ambitious, individualistic and demanding. Indeed, Ashley equated feminists to “rebels” and “usurpers.”\textsuperscript{45} Feminism is misconstrued as a monstrosity, as a divisive ideology that could destroy the church. Thus, rejecting feminism and using the language of calling placates a congregation’s fears that women are inappropriately wielding authority.\textsuperscript{46} Strategically, this may be necessarily so for some women, like Ashley, who face fierce opposition in their desire to pastor. By naming her desire godly and by rejecting individualistic feminism, Ashley can perhaps apologetically convince her more oppositional relatives that her intentions are noble.

Hope’s rejection of feminism is another compliment to her use of the language of calling. Hope reported being blissfully unaware of feminism before our interview. Upon reading the letter of introduction that ethically included the original title of this paper that mentioned feminism, Hope searched online and asked friends about feminism. Hope stated:

I would have to be honest, I have had a negative view of [feminism] because...I never really thought anything more than I just wanted to be a wife and minister with my husband...I didn’t feel threatened by society...I just always was confident that this is what I wanted.\textsuperscript{47}

While Hope articulated that no one challenged her calling to be a pastor, rejecting feminism was another easy speech act to make

\textsuperscript{40} There are churches, such as lay-led churches, that take a non-hierarchical approach to authority and members could all theoretically baptize and christen. Even in these more anti-authority gatherings, the uttering of performative speech acts not only baptize and christen, they still confer spiritual authority on the spokesperson. Nevertheless, all of the women in this study belonged to churches that neatly defined authority as limited.
\textsuperscript{43} Susan Cody, “Recognizing Gender Bias, Rejecting Feminism,” 51.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid
\textsuperscript{45} Ashley, interview, April 5, 2013.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid
\textsuperscript{47} Hope, interview, March 15, 2013.
to confirm her unthreatening role as clergywoman. This rejection of feminism, alongside the pacifying language of being called, produces a diffident femininity.

Despite using the language of calling, many of the other women offered a more cautious approach to feminism. In Ashley’s blog post entitled “It’s Because I’m a Girl Right?,” she states, “I’m not trying to be a rebel, I’m not trying to be a usurper. I’m not one of those ultra-liberal-feminist preacher-women.” Yet, when I asked directly, Ashley called herself a “quiet feminist” or “passivist feminist” or “diplomatic feminist.”

Augmenting the term feminist offers a nuanced relationship. It suggests that feminism carries uncomfortable baggage so Ashley may feel the need to qualify her relationship to it. She further stated “I don’t like claiming terms.” There are many ways to understand this more cautious rejection. What stands out for me is the possible antithetical relationship between calling and feminism. The language of calling allays fears of usurpation, while, in Ashley’s blog post, feminism is a seizure of power. As such, the rejection or caution towards feminism, in relationship to the legitimating function of “calling,” further constitutes women on the outside of spiritual authority, attempting to justify their interloping behaviour.

Studying these speech acts (“I am called” and “I am not a feminist”) is integral to understanding how women exercising spiritual authority perform and speak in certain ways that re-constitute spiritual authority as masculine. Specifically, the two speech acts together (“I am called” and “I am not a feminist”) provide a powerful narrative of necessary rationalization as a means to grasp masculine spiritual authority. The important point is that neither performance undermines and challenges what counts as spiritual authority. Indeed, these speech acts paint a powerful picture of regulation and exclusion.

**Clothing: the mark of a woman**

Clothing and appearance, often considered trivial, were central to some of the clergywomen’s interviews. Some of the women expressed a strong sense that their womanness was intimately connected to what they wore. As one of the quotes in the introduction expressed a preoccupation with choosing appropriate footwear, some women expressed feelings of anxiety and fear. Others viewed clothing rather metaphorically – correct attire conveyed appropriate spiritual authority. Regardless of why attire is important, it either marked the woman as de-gendered or not masculine.

Butler’s theory of performativity is important for underscoring how both regulatory mechanisms compel the clergywomen in this study to adorn themselves and understand that adornment in masculinised terms. I am cautious and aware that discussing clothing could lead a reader to think a simple solution to masculinised spiritual authority could simply be subverted by wearing different clothes. On the contrary, such subversions are heavily penalized and difficult to execute as rebellious. Indeed, this section demonstrates that both emphasized feminine attire and de-gendered attire confirm spiritual authority as masculine.

Heavy scrutiny of women’s clothing signals two regulatory regimes. One, the focus on embodiment reconstitutes a gendered mind/body dualism in which femininity is associated with the body and that body is subsequently devalued. While many women in the study did debate about what they would say on Sunday morning or Saturday evening as the case may be, they also talked about the stress and regulation of their clothing. Just as Toms conveyed a philanthropic manner, many of the clergywomen saw their attire as possible symbols of doctrine. What the following narrative indicates is that their attire did carry contested symbolic meaning, but also that the intense regulation and scrutiny of women’s

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48 Miriam called herself “borderline feminist.”
49 Bonham, “It’s Because I’m a Girl, Right?”
50 Ashley, interview, April 5, 2013.
51 Ashley, interview, April 5, 2013.
bodies in positions of authority left the male norm of power unquestioned. Hope found that how women adorned their bodies exposed the theological underpinnings of the congregation. “There was a lot of pressure to perform, to be dressed well, to wear designer clothes, to be very perfect...Women were definitely regulated to a certain spot in ministry.” The way Hope talked about this church suggested that they focused on prosperity, also known pejoratively as prosperity preaching. Prosperity preaching typically includes promises of wealth and riches for faithful Christians. Women’s clothing becomes the embodiment of that theology. Similarly, Miriam grew up in the austere tradition of Christian Reformed Church where her lack of flashy attire seemed to embody the doctrine: “I have to dress the part...I was a teenager when my mother was told that she shouldn’t wear lipstick as a minister’s wife; and that I shouldn’t wear boots.” These comments suggest that women’s bodies are material sites of contested theology. Of note, it is not women’s ideas under discussion, but bodies as the visible spiritual battlegrounds. What is less contested is that the constant focus on women’s bodies has the potential to erase or obscure women as rational, mindful, spiritual authority-wielding intellects.

While the focus on attire illustrates clergywomen’s concerns with embodiment, women’s bodies can be viewed more threateningly. Maria, a recent cancer survivor, articulated the importance of bodies the strongest:

Women’s experience reminds us that we cannot control our bodies. We find that out when we turn 12. You know, we can’t say, I’m sorry, but I am not going to menstruate...we risk our lives to procreate. Men don’t...we never lose sense that we are embodied. Maria articulated how the “church [is] presumed to be for men.” Women’s bodies literally personify a threat, sometimes referred to as polluting or defiling. Women in positions of spiritual authority are even more threatening because they interrupt the male congruence between male god and male minister. Interestingly, differences, as articulated by Maria, can be conceptualized as a threat to the male church, further suggesting that women occupy a precarious position outside the norm.

Two, judging how women’s bodies are decorated signals women’s role as eye candy for men’s pleasure. Cody discusses how women in certain clothing were not taken seriously as leaders. What Butler would want one to look at is the ways one is regulated simply by the amount of time one spends thinking about adornment. For example, Olga expressed a deep concern: “I consider very carefully what I wear at what occasion because I think...how I appear to people makes a difference.” These women articulated deep, time-consuming concerns about how one adorns one’s body to minister is perhaps unique to women. This attention to clothing regulates spiritual authority in a specific way.

Focusing on feminine clothing options may constitute one form of regulation, but more common was wearing gender-neutralizing robes. Most of the women preached in robes:

52 Hope, interview, March 15, 2013.
54 Miriam, interview, March 19, 2013.
55 Maria, interview, April 3, 2013.
56 Maria, interview, April 3, 2013.
58 Lawless, “Writing the Body,” 57.
59 Cody, “Recognizing Gender Bias,” 44.
60 Olga, interview, April 5, 2013.
Women’s clothing is used to draw attention. I want the attention to be on what I am offering and not how I am looking...So I find every summer, are we going to wear robes? Please. Then because I don’t have to worry about sleeve length and skirt length and neckline. And I can disappear. 61

I am very thankful that we have our robes…I don’t want the people to talk about what I wear…I have a better sense of what role am I in right now if I wear my robe. 62

Watching these women preach in robes, it struck me that the robes removed many gender markers. Even though Miriam was in heels and robe, those heels were often hidden when she stood behind the pulpit. The only other physical marker of femininity was the tasteful makeup and jewellery some of the other women wore. 63 Similarly, like the pulpit, the robes are a marker of authority that seems vital for women, but redundant for men. 64 Women pastors cling to the pulpit to create an authoritative space. 65 While I noticed none of the women literally clutching the piece of wood, these women rhetorically held fast to the robes. For the women in this study, robes are a form of disembodiment and could neutralize the threat of the woman preaching authoritatively at the pulpit. 66

Butler would be wary of the terminology of de-gendering as gender is not an institution that she thinks society can totally dismantled. What this signals is that the rhetoric of de-gendering is a disciplinary discourse. Importantly, men do not need to be de-gendered by the robes to legitimize their spiritual authority. Men are already rightful bearers of this authority. Despite the removal of obvious gender markers, the so-called de-gendering is incomplete. Femininity cannot be completely removed from the discussion. However, the intention of de-gendering women and the internalized attachment towards the robes suggests a stronger point that women do not fit the norm of spiritual authority and so their threatening feminine bodies must be hidden. As such, Butler’s wariness of the language of de-gendering highlights how removing gender from the conversation regulates and disciplines clergywomen, while leaving the definition of spiritual authority as masculine unchallenged.

There is yet a darker and more obvious form of regulation experienced by some clergywomen. When I first asked Hilda about clothing, she was visibly taken aback. At the end of the interview, she stated:

It came to my mind when you talked about clothing and...my feelings is that female pastors...are more confronted by sexual assault than male colleagues, of course especially by men...this is, I think, one of the challenges in this profession because you are expected to be welcoming and friendly and personal. 67

Cody found a similar trend; “some of the comments [about their looks] bordered on sexual harassment.” 68 This suggests that there is a dangerous gendered reality where sexual harassment and assault are looming threats. 69

Attention to women’s looks is not benign. The importance of clothing goes beyond authority, legitimacy, and looking good. Pointedly, the constant threat of sexual assault exaggerates the precarious positions of power these women hold. Indeed, either de-gendered by robes or obviously embodied, these women face intense

61 Maria, interview, April 3, 2013.
62 Olga, interview, April 5, 2013.
65 Ibid.
66 Lawless, “Writing the Body,” 94.
67 Hilda, interview, April 4, 2013.
68 Cody, “Recognizing Gender Bias,” 44.
scrutiny and internalized regulation that recodes pastoring as men’s work.

**Gender difference**

While the discussion of attire caught me off-guard, the literature suggested that I should find discussions of gendered difference in pastoring.\(^7\) Locating evidence of gendered difference is quite important because scholars have argued that different ministry styles have the potential to change a congregation’s idea about gender in positions of spiritual authority.\(^7\) What I found interrupted these findings slightly to suggest that clergywomen claiming difference and performing feminine difference re-constituted spiritual authority as masculine. While this does not negate a woman’s potential to challenge that definition of spiritual authority, I argue it is important to re-orient the literature to become aware of how understandings of gender difference (from totally natural to solely socialized) leaves that definition untouched.

Occupying the liminal space of pastor and/or pastor’s wife, Hope articulated a complicated view of gender difference. Unlike studies that found women rarely used the language of coverture,\(^7\) Hope used this language to theoretically describe her marriage, while also calling her marriage practically equal.\(^7\) Coverture refers to the legal doctrine in common law which “established the fiction that husband and wife had a single identity—that of the husband.”\(^7\) Self described as evangelical, Hope’s narrative is consistent with other findings; “the majority of contemporary evangelicals hold to symbolic traditionalism and pragmatic egalitarianism.”\(^7\) One could read the performance of egalitarianism within the rhetoric of coverture to suggest that Hope is undermining the unequal practices of evangelism. That may be the case. It is also the case that Hope’s vehement adherence to symbolic inequality does not challenge the content of masculine spiritual authority.

In a similar vein, some of the women in this study emphasized a feminine style of preaching and rather than challenge what is considered a masculine style of preaching, some of these women propagate a dichotomist view of styles. Scholars have suggested that women employ or reject feminine styles of preaching and leadership to gain acceptance.\(^7\) A feminine style of preaching is then set in opposition to the norm:

A women’s style: they are storytellers; they are earthly in that their stories are grounded in the everyday. This one I am thinking of, she has a poetic way of preaching yet it’s biblically and theologically rich…it’s much more invitational than direct.\(^7\)

A lot of the male preachers [preach]…the three-point kind of sermon.\(^7\)

Here, Maria and Ashley present an opposition—women’s more earthly, experientially-based preaching and men’s formulaic style preaching. Maria did preach like this with lots of statements that invited the listener to join in reflection. Of course, there are men and women

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\(^7\) Rita Simon and Pamela Nadella, “In the same voice or is it difference? Gender and the clergy,” *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995): 63-70.


\(^7\) Cody-Rydzewski, “Married Clergy Women,” 287.

\(^7\) Hope, interview, March 15, 2013.


\(^7\) Sally Gallagher and Christian Smith, “Symbolic traditionalism and pragmatic egalitarianism: Contemorary evangelicals, families, and gender,” *Gender & Society* 13 (1999), 211.

\(^7\) Lehman, “Gender and Ministry Style;” Maddux, “The Feminized Gospel.”

\(^7\) Maria, interview, April 3, 2013.

\(^7\) Ashley, interview, April 5, 2013.
that deviate from this binary. However, the discussion of gendered styles of preaching and the performance of these styles does not challenge what is typically thought of as spiritual authority. Indeed, the discussion is set up as either a clergywoman’s need to reject feminine styles of preaching or employ them strategically. The norm is left unspoken and unchallenged.

There is an assumption that this difference is innate; however, there was recognition among some of the interviewees that women are disadvantaged because of non-biological, socialized differences as well. While many of the clergywomen recognize a woman’s role in childbirth to be unique, most of the women seemed to advocate for equal practices. Olga summed it up best: “that is the moment I fear that women are supposed to do the homework instead of men.” Maria goes further to suggest that unequal practices are detrimental: “But too easily women serve by giving their very selves away. And I don’t think that serves the church.” Here, the difference may be rooted in biology or the capacity to rear children, but the source of oppression is the socialized way women selflessly serve. This is an important caveat that gendered difference may be totally socialized. However, the fact that many of the women I interviewed thought the difference was inherent and unproblematic suggests that barriers clergywomen face within ministry is the unchallenged notion of difference. Performing difference, I have argued, does not effectively challenge what counts as spiritual authority, rather the masculine norm remains intact.

Conclusion

Indeed, the masculine norm of spiritual authority is not challenged by these performances. Using the language of calling placates fears of women’s ambitions and further distancing oneself from so-called usurping liberal feminist label ensures that these clergywomen enter spiritual authority with the least amount of disturbances. More to the point, the dual regulation of de-gendering in the form of robes and emphasizing difference define a clergywoman as an outsider. What is left unspoken is the masculine norm. While previous studies argue that any woman performing spiritual authority challenges what constitutes spiritual authority, Butler’s theory of performativity indicates that scholars need to pay more attention to how gender is regulated in specific ways to support hegemonic structures – in this case, men’s dominance and powerful leadership in protestant churches. This paper has discussed some of the ways clergywomen’s performances of spiritual authority through speech acts, attire and claiming difference are integral to regulating gender norms in the church. The reverse is also important to this study. The regulation of these women’s performativity is integral to the constitution of spiritual authority.

This study, of course, is not without its shortcomings. Rather than dwell on these issues as weaknesses, I see such shortcomings as opportunities for future research and innovation. Methodologically, given that gender performance is relational, future work could focus on that aspect by interviewing parishioners or engaging in longer ethnographic research. As well, men also face gender regulation. Comparing the regulation of men and women exercising spiritual authority could polish the mechanisms discussed in this paper (speech acts, wardrobe, and claiming difference). Finally, although there is a growing body of literature that examines those exercising spiritual authority outside gender binaries, more work needs to be done to excavate those exercising spiritual authority without resting on

80 Olga, interview, April 5, 2013.
81 Maria, interview, April 3, 2013.
a binary understanding of gender/sex and masculinity/femininity.

What I must leave room for is the possibility that these women, while performing under heavily regulated conditions, do potentially challenge what spiritual authority looks like, feels like, and acts like. Despite the heavy sanction they face, these women continue to do good work in heavily masculinised spaces. Despite the need to rationalize their authority, the threat of judgement, the threat of violence, or the experience of exclusionary differences, these clergywomen’s stylized acts must reconstitute these spaces slightly. What scholars needs to be wary of is over-emphasizing the capacity to challenge the masculinised norm, as I have demonstrated that these regulatory mechanisms effectively confirm that spiritual authority in these protestant churches is masculine.

Bibliography


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