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Revivalist women's submission: Women's spiritual authority, biblical feminism and cosmofeminism

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ABSTRACT

The question of whether or not feminisms can be found among revivalist women has been widely debated in the field of women's and gender studies. My research with Pentecostal women in the countries of New Zealand and the USA (Missouri) argues that Pentecostal women have a unique brand of feminism intertwined with what they term 'submission,' a submission given to God before men. In qualitative interviews, participants revealed the multi-dimensionality of submission as an inseparable tenet of their spiritual power in faith healing, prophecy and other spiritual gifts. Using a biblical feminist perspective, a branch of feminist theology that looks at biblical representations of women through an egalitarian lens, I provide an overview of the differentiated beliefs surrounding the women's approach to submission doctrine and biblical feminism itself. I conclude by arguing that the women's positive engagement with difference in the masculine dominated social field of Pentecostalism can be understood as an expression of a grounded cosmopolitanism.

1. Introduction

This article engages with the concept of women's spiritual authority in two locations of the worldwide movement of Pentecostalism, New Zealand and Missouri, USA. The majority of the women with whom I spoke in the course of this research took a culturally feminist approach to issues of equality and to gender relations within Pentecostalism. Their narratives revealed that their experiences and beliefs were primarily grounded in a sense of what it meant to be a Pentecostal woman, the focus of this article. They demonstrated a deep and cerebral knowledge about 'submission' to God and spoke of how they do indeed "submit" to God (and men, when they choose to). They proposed a plethora of definitions of understanding about submission, its meanings, and its application in their lives. They revealed that they co-opt submission, weaving it into their lived relationships with God and the men in their lives, especially husbands, pastors, and other male ministers, and reframed it as an honourable foundation for their identity and selfhood.

This article adopts a framework of cosmopolitan feminism² strongly

influenced by Niamh Reilly's work, especially the idea of the "constructive tension" inherent in the feminist standpoint of particular "marginalized experiences and identities" that she identifies (2011: 381). In Reilly's scheme, cosmopolitan feminism requires a "principled commitment" to universal values that are critically reinterpreted (381). I see this framework as particularly suited to writing about revivalist women in my research locales who "do" feminism but mostly do not take for themselves universal feminist ideals or even call themselves feminist (although some do). I shall argue that theirs is a model of emancipatory spiritual practice, in that they emancipate themselves from identifying with feminism in general and redefine feminism on their own terms.³

What I shall term cosmopolitan feminism, or cosmofeminism does not assume that all women are united under common experiences of patriarchal oppression or gender identities (Ram, 2008: 142; Reilly, 2011: 369; Stevens, 2008: 90). Instead, it makes room for unique views to bring to the table of feminist discourses. Cosmopolitan feminism is seen as a "process-oriented framework" (Reilly, 2011: 369), in which all work together for the common good. For instance, the claims to

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² I use feminism in this instance as Graham (1995:13) defines it, a "body of theory and politics" which seeks to rectify women's exclusion and subordination in every form, and holds that the intersection where "society," "self," and "knowledge" converge is a vitally contested space for feminist theory.

³ The terms "Pentecostals" and "revivalists" are used interchangeably within this article, in accordance with the women's practices of expressive worship and their focus on "the call." Revivalists often privilege the call as providing ordination and being the authorizing force for ministry. The term "revivalist" can be traced back to eighteenth century Protestantism and the Great Awakening, in which glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and other spiritual practices, along with holy living, punctuated revivalists' lives (Payne, 2015: 11–12). Franks (2001a: 10), with other scholars also chooses the term "revivalist" to describe her respondents, as opposed to the word "fundamentalists," which, she said, carried pejorative connotations and insinuated zealous anti-intellectualism. In this study, I recognized and took this on board as well.

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universal sisterhood by white, "First World" feminists were immediately challenged by non-white women of varying sexualities, classes and ethnicities in developed and developing countries, who did not recognize themselves in the dominant narrative (Bulbeck, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 2003; Ram, 2008; Reilly, 2011). Comparatively, I shall explore revivalist women's rejection of postmodern feminism which mirrors this contestatory stance, and discuss the ways in which some see themselves as exhibiting what has been termed "biblical feminism" (Scanzoni & Hardesty, 1992, 1974) through the exercise of submission doctrine, which they see as bringing them great spiritual authority. This is the fount of their agency, making a feminist space.

Submission is conflated with having spiritual power in a Pentecostal theological worldview because it gives a woman authority when she steps out under the aegis of her calling and spiritual gifts, in submission to God over all others. When revivalist women exhibit submission, enact their ministerial callings and embody their spiritual gifts, these practices provide the foundation for a woman's identity as a spiritually powerful person in a Pentecostal cosmos. Members of the women's faith communities view them as having great spiritual authority. Therefore, submission is a foundation for both spiritual authority and biblical feminism.

This study fits within a body of work about revivalist women who create dilemmas for secular-liberal feminist scholarship because they are ensconced in a religious setting that has historically been seen as subordinating women. Yet, these studies reveal that revivalist women often co-opt and use patriarchal language as a tool for their empowerment (Brasher, 1998; Franks, 2001a; Ginsburg, 1997; Griffith, 1997; Ingersoll, 2003; Luff, 1999; Mahmood, 2005). This study also fits within a body of work about women's spiritual authority, when they act on the close relationship that they believe they have with the Deity, and the empowerment that they receive through their embodiment of spiritual force (Boyce-Tillman, 1993; Brasher, 1998; Brown, 1994; Butler, 2007; Griffith, 1997; Raphael, 1996; Reuther Radford, 1985; Spretnak, 1982).

Revivalist women's production of knowledge about submission and the spiritual power that flows from it is evidence that they do not prioritize the feminist label but work within it. The women of this research used submission as an outcome of their relationship with God, always giving it to God over all others, especially men. Submission ushered them into male-dominated spaces that were potentially closed to them otherwise. In this article, I address the women's reflexivity and the ontological stance borne from their experience of enacting and embodying submission in cerebral and local ways in their homes and faith communities. The authority this brings them is, I argue, a feminist space in itself. Finally, I shall address their right to difference, which, I shall also argue, makes biblical feminism a form of cosmofeminism.

I now turn to a discussion of methods followed by a results section defining biblical feminism and my research findings. This will be followed by a section on submission as a foundational force for both biblical feminism and spiritual authority. I shall then discuss biblical feminism as a form of cosmofeminism, before making my concluding remarks.

2. Methods

Pentecostalism now numbers more than 520 million people globally, with an estimated two-thirds of this population being women (Cartledge, 2010: 2-3; Hallum Motley, 2003; Knowles, 2014: 235-36). The gendered and spiritual experiences of Pentecostal women, therefore, provide a rich site for research. That is why for nearly two years (2012–2014), I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with sixty-one Pentecostal women in New Zealand and Missouri, USA who were from a variety of ethnic and educational backgrounds (see Figs. 1–6).

The women supported and taught one another the doctrine of submission to men and God as a means of exercising spiritual authority. Their study and exegesis of biblical scriptures, the socio-cultural practice of submission and the ways they embodied that were germane to

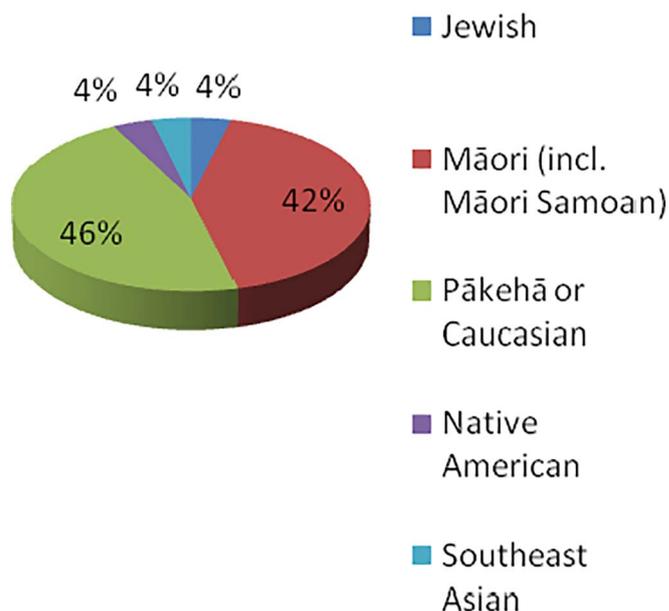


Fig. 1. Ethnicity – New Zealand Informants.

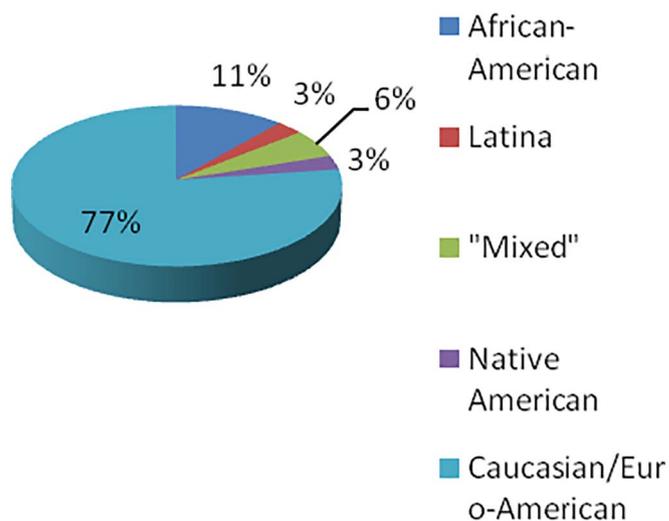


Fig. 2. Ethnicity – USA Informants.

their ability to exercise authority through their spiritual gifts.⁴ Examples of the gifts that women claimed included faith healing, prophecy, discernment of spirits, interpretation of diverse tongues, and others. These spiritual giftings are considered to be given only to Christians and are for the edification of members of the faith community in caring for one another.⁵

A feminist cosmopolitan project requires cross-boundary networking and this was especially the case with the present project, which traversed denominations, ethnicities and countries. The women respondents who contributed to this qualitative study came from two denominations in two countries: the Assemblies of God, New Zealand (AG/NZ) and the Assemblies of God, USA (AG/USA); the United Pentecostal Church, International, New Zealand (UPCI/NZ), and the United Pentecostal Church, International, USA (UPCI/USA). Our conversations took place in homes, churches, coffee shops and restaurants

⁴ There are numerous scriptures that underscore the spiritual gifts, including (but not limited to) Romans 11:29 & 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 7, 12, 13 & 14; Ephesians 3 & 4:4–16, and 1 Peter 4.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:12, 1 Corinthians 12:7, 25; 1 Corinthians 14:12, 26, 1 Peter 4:10.

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