

Female conversion experience:
a comparative study of gender experience
within Christianity

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of Master of
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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Abstract

There is an ancient tradition of “conversion” within religion, especially with regard to Christianity. This is a specific aspect of religious experience that has been studied from many perspectives. Little contemporary work has been completed to identify whether the experiences of women differ from those of men. This paper focuses on whether differences exist within gendered Christian conversion experience.

The study focuses on whether, and if so, what differences exist within the Christian conversion experiences of women and men. The hypothesis was that as the gendered experiences of women and men differ within Christianity and religion generally, there would be a corresponding difference within their conversion experience. Qualitative research was completed using face to face interviews with participants who were principally from churches with an evangelical and protestant theological ideology. In addition, research was conducted using the database of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre. My study focused on the events that led up to the individual’s experience to include their background, the timescale of conversion, the effect it had on the individual’s life, did they have Christian friends and a Christian support system, how did they experience God, was their conversion experience slow or immediate?

The findings were that equal numbers of women and men experience religious conversion. Evangelist interpretation within the UK focuses upon the precise interpretation of the New Testament when defining what is meant by “conversion”.

The overwhelming finding, from an “insider’s” perspective was that the conversion experience of women did not differ from that of men. The evidence implies that people who have existing connections with evangelical traditions use their cultural background to make sense of their religious experience. Deeper analysis of language use and gender roles revealed certain key differences that will be presented within the dissertation.

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Introduction

Background and focus of research

My interest in Christian conversion stems from a dissertation I completed as an undergraduate religious studies student. My paternal great grandfather, the Rev. Joseph Jenkins, was a minister in the Calvinist Methodist church. He was instrumental in initiating and developing the revival or conversion of thousands of individuals within Wales in 1904. Subsequent to learning about the conversion of thousands of people, I developed a fascination in the process of conversion, what this meant to people, what they experienced and the impact it had upon their lives. At the turn of the twentieth century the Welsh Calvinist Methodist revival was led by ministers who were all men. Joseph Jenkins preached in a number of different chapels throughout Wales. He toured north Wales in the autumn and winter of 1904, preaching to thousands of people who converted to the Calvinist Methodist Christian religion. He was accompanied by two women (Florrie Evans and Maud Davies) on many of these journeys. They were women who had been converted as a result of Jenkins' sermons and ministering.

Their role was supportive, they assisted with galvanising the youth through their own experiences and also advocated conversion. It was clear to me that during the Welsh revival there were distinct expectations for the roles of women and men. My research into Jenkins' work developed into a broader interest about the nature of conversion; why does it occur, what experiences do people have, is conversion still relevant today? Parallel to my interest in conversion was an interest in gender differences, it

seemed an obvious move to link gender and conversion. I wanted to explore whether women and men experience conversion differently. My starting point was to gain a baseline understanding of the term 'religious experience'.

There are many definitions of religious experience, some are linked to religion and some can be linked to an expression of a spiritual state which may not be directly linked to religion. For example, Marianne Rankin gives a definition of religious experience, she explains that it is an experience that is something which is "beyond, normal everyday life" and which has "spiritual or religious significance for the person to whom it happens".¹ Rankin's broad definition implies that a religious experience does not have to be directly linked to a religion. However, as this dissertation will examine Christian conversion, a better definition may be one expressed by Robert Pope as "something extraordinary that occurs in an individual's life, which is explained by appealing to a sense of immediate contact with the divine, the ineffable, the real, or God".² This study is more specific than a broad study of religious experience as it focuses on the religious conversion experiences of Christian individuals. The literature review refers to numerous definitions of religious experience and explores important academic contributions to this field.

Religious conversion has been written about for over a thousand years. We are all familiar with the story of Saul, a Pharisee, who, whilst travelling from Jerusalem to Damascus in approximately AD 33 converted to Christianity.³ The circumstances of

¹ Marianne Rankin, *An Introduction To Religious and Spiritual Experience* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

² Robert Pope, 'Immediate Revelation or the Basest Idolatry', in *The Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. By Bettina E. Schmidt (Sheffield, Equinox: 2016), pp. 105-124, (p. 108).

³ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: His Story* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2004), <https://www-oxfordscholarship-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/view/10.1093/0199266530.001.0001/acprof-9780199266531-chapter-1> [Accessed 01.12.19].

his conversion were dramatic, “a light from heaven flashed around him”,⁴ Saul was struck to the ground and rendered blind for three days.⁵ One cannot fail to be fascinated by such an intense event. Questions emerge such as curiosity about what are the factors that led to this, why did it occur and what happened next? Such issues were of interest to scholars, aspects of conversion have been studied by since the beginning of the twentieth century when the psychologist Edwin Starbuck wrote *The Psychology of Religion*⁶ which included an opening chapter on conversion. William James’ famous book about religious experience included a section on conversion. James acknowledges that as a psychologist he was attracted to study the “religious propensities of man”.⁷ The interest from psychologists in religious conversion continued as can be seen from studies conducted by John Lofland and Rodney Stark in the 1960s. Many of these early studies focused on the emotional state of the individual prior to their conversion.

Later academic study focused on other aspects of the lives of people prior to conversion, this included their cultural and social background and influences. Henri Gooren, Lewis Rambo and many others developed models of conversion designed to offer an explanation for the reasons that lead people to convert to Christianity. Rambo, for example, argued that conversion needs to be viewed in context with the entirety of an individual’s life as a whole.⁸ As illustrated within the literature review, there has been a plethora of research conducted about the phenomenon of conversion and Christian conversion. Conversion has been studied from the

⁴ Acts 9. 3.

⁵ Acts 9. 4-9.

⁶ Edwin Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (London: William Scott, 1900)

⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1982), p. 2.

⁸ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 5.

perspective of psychology, anthropology, philosophy, theology and sociology. Less has been written comparing the experiences of women and men within religions, though a limited number of studies do exist. Even less exists exploring conversion experiences of different genders. The literature review identifies and summarises these. In addition, the literature review includes details of gender differences that exist in religion, this will help the reader gain knowledge about the way in which differences in power and cultural positions exist within Christianity. It will also establish why it is important to understand that there is a difference between the gendered experiences of women and men, to identify why this occurs; and to determine the impact that it has on women's lives generally and within Christianity.

Research aims

I identified that there was an opportunity to explore whether there were differences between the Christian conversion experiences of women from men. My hypothesis was if there are clear differences in the historical and present roles of women and men in Christianity, it followed that there should be differences within their conversion experiences. My aim was to

1. To explore whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men within Christianity.
2. Establish why it is important to understand that there is a difference between the gendered experiences of women and men, to identify why this occurs; and to determine the impact that it has on women's lives within Christianity.
 - To compare the experiences of men and women, to identify differences that occur within the conversion experience, identify how such differences are manifested, hypothesise as to why such differences exist.
 - To analyse individual experiences of both sexes, gained in part through interviews and in part through accessing accounts housed within the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre in Lampeter.
 - To question whether the way in which difference in gender status impacts upon the way that religious experience and conversion have previously been researched.

Research methods

1. A literature survey in order to examine and critique a broad spectrum of classifications around the topic “religious conversion”. It will also be necessary to carry out a similar examination of the way in which religious conversion is classified across disciplines to include a critique of the current models which exist to define the subject. This will define the overarching context of the research within which the study will lie. Within this, the intent of the research is to establish how the classification of conversion can be related to Western Christianity. This research will be carried out using library-based facilities combined with on-line research using journals.
2. The second aim of the study is to posit questions concerning whether there is a difference between the religious experiences of men and women who convert to Christianity. Prior to establishing this, it will be necessary to examine the differences that exist within the gendered experiences of men and women in the Christian church, to understand why this has occurred and to examine how these impact upon women today. Research into generalised gender issues within the field of religious studies will be used as a basis for gender matters within conversion.
3. Research will be carried out to establish the conversion experiences of women and men. This will be carried out using a mixture of fieldwork and analysis of information that has already been catalogued such as in the Religious Experience Research Centre in Lampeter. The fieldwork will involve

interviews with a few selected individuals (subject to ethical approval).

Subjects to take part in the study will be sought via adverts in the Journal and Newsletter of the Alister Hardy Trust, St Padarn's Institute in Cardiff and the Presbyterian Church of Wales. Due to the time constraint of the MRes programme only a few individuals will be selected.

4. The aim of the interviews will be to discuss whether it is possible to establish a link with cultural differences and conversion experiences. However, due to the time constraint of the MRes Programme the interviews will serve as a pilot study for a later, more intensive research project (e.g., for a PhD). The focus in this study will be on gender. This will be based upon qualitative research but will also be compared against differences that have been shown to exist between men and women that are established in early childhood. A comparison between the conversion experiences of women and men will be carried out and appropriate conclusions drawn.

Value of this research

This research will add value to the academic community for what it contributes to the field of research into Christian conversion and gender differences. Whilst, as described within the 'Methodology' chapter it does not fully meet all of the identified aims, it nevertheless provides a valuable and focused insight into the conversion experiences of evangelical Christian conversion which is supported by accounts from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Database. This research has the potential to be expanded and built on in the future by students wishing to undertake a PhD study.

Outline of Dissertation

The dissertation begins with a chapter on methodology, this includes an anonymised description of who was interviewed and where other information was obtained, the problems associated with the study and a self-reflection on what was achieved. An extensive literature review which covers the subjects of religious experience, conversion and religious gender issues. Following this, there are two chapters which present the evidence, one uses models of conversion from Henri Gooren and Lewis Rambo, and also references influential work conducted by William James. The second chapter examines the differences between the genders with regard to conversion experiences and their implications. Finally, there is a conclusion which sums up the research and makes recommendations.

Methodology

The overall aim of the research was to identify whether there was a difference in the conversion experiences of women and men who converted to Christianity. In order to achieve this aim, I decided that I would need to research and define religious experience and provide a clear understanding of the definitions of conversion. It was necessary to establish why it is important to understand that there might be a difference between the gendered experiences of women and men and to identify why this occurs; furthermore, to determine the impact that it has on women's lives generally and within Christianity. In order to meet these aims, evidence of the individual experiences of women and men would need to be gathered and analysed. Therefore, a general understanding of gender based issues that exist within the Christian church would need to be established.

I completed a literature review which included research into conversion experiences and the aspects from which conversion had been previously studied. From this, I was able to identify that there has been very little academic research completed on how women experience religious conversion and whether there is any discernible difference between the perceptions of women and men. The gendered experiences of women within Christianity have and do differ greatly from those of men, I considered that because of this, the subject deserved further research. Following on from this, I conjectured that it was logical to form a hypothesis that women would experience conversion in a different way from men. As a result, I decided that the type of research I could conduct would be deductive. Deductive research involves making a hypothesis and from this point the "findings [of the research] are assessed

by deducing certain consequences from the hypothesis”.⁹ In order to progress with the deductive research, I needed to obtain evidence to test my hypothesis. I decided to conduct fieldwork which would involve interviews with individuals who had been through a conversion experience.

As a researcher, I needed to ask myself what led me to wish to study Christian conversion experiences. I have a general interest in conducting academic research which has helped to fuel this dissertation. In addition, I had been brought up in an environment where Christian family beliefs were strongly felt in a rural Welsh setting. I previously studied my great grandfather who was a prominent Presbyterian minister. I discovered that he had had a religious experience of his own and became curious about the impact that such experiences have on individuals. I have a strong interest in the difference between genders which exist within the Welsh culture. Kim Etherington argues that, “the choice of research topic often has personal significance for the researcher, whether conscious or unconscious”.¹⁰ My own background alongside my desire to validate my research hypothesis leads to a potential bias within my work. In order to ensure that the research is not biased, I have reflected above on how this might occur.¹¹ I have also ensured that interpretive points have been supported with previously completed research. I have a very supportive supervisor who advises me as appropriate.

⁹ Rob Barnes, “*Successful Study for Degrees*”, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 111.

¹⁰ Kim Etherington, *Becoming a Reflective Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004), p. 110.

¹¹ John McLeod, *Case Study Research: In Counselling and Psychotherapy* (London: Sage, 2012), p. 33.

I was interested in the stories that people had to tell, in their experiences of what had happened to them in the period prior to their conversion, what happened during the conversion and how this had subsequently changed their lives. With this in mind, I decided to choose research based upon narrative enquiry, one which Etherington describes as, “a methodology based upon collecting, analysing, and re-presenting people’s stories as told by them”. Etherington expands by writing, “These approaches are based upon epistemologies that view reality and knowledge as socially constructed”.¹² The notion that gender is culturally and socially constructed will be explored further in the dissertation. Narrative enquiry lends itself to qualitative research as it involves the opportunity to meet with a small group of individuals and gain detailed information from them. Judith Bell and Stephen Waters describe qualitative research as a type of research used by those who, “doubt whether social ‘facts’ exist and question whether a ‘scientific’ approach can be used when dealing with human beings”.¹³

Quantitative research is concerned with figures and “measurements”, qualitative research is “linked to in-depth exploratory studies”, exploring the “why” things occur.¹⁴

The importance of using both narrative enquiry and a qualitative research method will be demonstrated in a later chapter. Qualitative research has given me the opportunity to examine the narratives of participants in detail to include their

¹² Etherington, p. 75.

¹³ Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project: a Guide for First-Time Researchers*, 6th edition (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2014), p. 9.

¹⁴ John Biggam, *Succeeding with Your Master’s Dissertation: a step-by-step handbook* (London: Open University Press, 2017), pp. 166-167.

opinions, motivations and beliefs. From this, I was able to form interpretive conclusions which I have used as a measure against my original hypothesis.

It was necessary to identify people who wished to take part in the research. Contacts were identified within the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and the Presbyterian Church of Wales. Adverts asking for participants were placed within the 'De Numine', the newsletter of the Alister Hardy Trust and in the Presbyterian bulletin. Following advice from a Presbyterian minister the word 'conversion' was altered to 'a change in religious orientation' as it was felt that this term was more modern and less restrictive. No interest was returned, I attempted to identify other avenues by which to progress my research.

I contacted Evangelical and charismatic churches within the Cardiff area, many were supportive and agreed to place notices asking for participants from within the church. One church responded with a statement that acknowledged that conversion is a highly personal experience that is based upon the faith of an individual and that it would not be possible to connect the requirements of academic research to a position that was based in faith. A pastor from an Evangelical church offered to ask members of his church's congregation whether they would consent to participate in the research; a small number of people agreed. In addition, two other people with links to Evangelical churches consented to take part in the research. The subsequent focus of my research conducted via interviews was on those from an Evangelical type faith. The selection of participants who were interviewed is therefore based upon a random selection, this means that no general statements or conclusions can be drawn from the evidence, it is very specific to those interviewed.

The pastor who contacted me was a key participant as he made it possible for me to interview the others from his church in Cardiff.

I decided that the interviews would be semi-structured. This gave me the opportunity to establish key questions in advance. It also acknowledged that I would be able to “improvise” and ask participants to expand on points that are important and develop my response based on facts, opinions, beliefs and feelings that they bring.¹⁵ The participants were sent a list of the questions prior to being interviewed, they were told that the questions were broad headings only which would form the basis of the meeting but that we could deviate from them. This allowed participants to be prepared for the interview and was meant to help put them at their ease. Questions were called ‘discussion topics’ and included:

- Can you tell me a little about yourself, your background, where you were born, your age, your job, do you live in a rural or urban environment?
- What events led up to your conversion to Christianity? Did you have a religious experience?
- Did you make a conscious decision to convert?
- Can you describe how you experienced your conversion, over what period of time?
- Did you feel there was any difference following the period of conversion? If so, what?
- Can you describe how you experience God?
- How do you practice your religion?

¹⁵ Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 5.

- Has converting to Christianity changed your life at all, if so how?
- Are, or were, your parents religious, are your family religious? Do they practice the same religion as you?
- Do you have friends that you feel influenced your conversion?
- Were there religious influences in your childhood?

Some of the participants were interviewed face to face, others agreed to meet via web-based video links. All participants consented to be recorded. A total of six interviews were completed. Four of the interviewees were women, ages ranged from early twenties to early sixties. Of these four, two were related to the pastor, his wife and daughter. One of the other participants' attends the pastor's church. The fourth woman attends an Evangelical church in England. Two men were interviewed, both were aged over sixty. One was the pastor from a church in Cardiff, the other was a retired Anglican vicar whose conversion had occurred within an Evangelical church. Due to the unbalanced mix of women and men and relationship to the pastor, it must be stressed that the findings of the research cannot be generalised, and the interpretation of experience can only be based upon the direct experiences of those interviewed. Acknowledgement of this, ensures validity of the research within the parameters of choices for those interviewed.

This small group of people has, conversely, given me the opportunity to explore conversion and gender in depth with a small and specific group of people. The issue of qualitative research lacking in generalised outcomes is seen as a "trade-off" against detailed research of a specific area, this issue has been described by Yvonne Darlington and Dorothy Scott as research which can only be understood in

the context of this dissertation.¹⁶ Details of where and when the research involving interviews with participants will be included within the body of the dissertation. A transcript of one of the interviews will be included in an appendix. In order to further ensure validity and reliability of the data and techniques used to gather the evidence, I used an additional source material.

I made use of accounts from a database housed at the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) at Lampeter University. The database was compiled by Alister Hardy. He collected a range of religious experiences from people all over the world, some of these experiences are concerned with Christian conversion. I conducted a search of the database and identified the accounts from nineteen men and sixteen women, these were compiled and examined for similarities and differences between genders. The data from the RERC was placed into a spreadsheet under headings that broadly corresponded with the subjects discussed during the interviews. This made it easier to analyse as I was able to use the spreadsheet to catalogue the evidence within the accounts to correspond with the questions I had included for the interviewees.

¹⁶ Yvonne Darlington and Dorothy Scott, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field* (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002) p. 17.

Literature Review

Religious Experience

Religious experience is an area which has drawn the attention of scholars for many centuries. For the purpose of this literature review, the key contributors from the twentieth and twenty first centuries will be identified, and their main work presented with weaknesses in their arguments identified. The first section will focus what an experience is. Religious experience can be classified in many different ways, some of these will be identified. The main body of this section of the literature review will concentrate on the arguments between perennialism and constructivism. Finally, a new model from which to study religious experience will be presented.

Marianne Rankin gives a definition of religious experience, she explains that it is an experience that is something which is “beyond, normal everyday life” and which has “spiritual or religious significance for the person to whom it happens”.¹⁷ This raises the question, what can be considered as religious? Caroline Franks Davis explores this, she writes that the term ‘religious’ needs to have a very broad meaning as it needs to be able to encompass all religions, not simply those defined by ‘God’. However, she warns against too wide a meaning as this can mean any experience which is intense or awe-inspiring.¹⁸ In order to provide a clearer definition, Franks Davis classifies types of religious experience into the following categories,

¹⁷ Marianne Rankin, *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

¹⁸ Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 29.

“Interpretive”, “Quasi-Sensory”, “Revelatory”, “Regenerative”, “Numinous” and “Mystical”.¹⁹

For the purposes of this dissertation the classification will be closely linked to Christian conversion experiences. Religious experiences that arise from the individual’s ‘interpretation’ will include experiences that have a direct link to the will of God or Holy Spirit.²⁰ Quasi-Sensory experiences include those which are smelt, tasted, touched, or involve any of the five senses.²¹ Revelatory experiences which include “sudden flashes of insight”.²² Regenerative experiences where individuals’ faith is deepened and strengthened.²³ A numinous experience where a person feels an overpowering, intense feeling.²⁴ A mystical experience, this is described by Franks Davis as being free from the limitations of space and time, a feeling of oneness or a sense of serenity.²⁵

Alister Hardy put together the Religious Experience Research Centre. He collected the religious experiences of thousands of individuals and encouraged the research of the subject of religious experience.²⁶ Hardy classified religious experiences into categories that include, “Sensory or Quasi-Sensory Experiences”, “Cognitive and Affective Elements”, “Dynamic Patterns of Experience” and “Triggers and Consequences”.²⁷ Hardy’s collection will be used as a basis for much of the research

¹⁹ Franks Davis, pp. 33-65.

²⁰ Franks Davis, p. 33.

²¹ Franks Davis, p. 36.

²² Franks Davis, p. 39.

²³ Franks Davis, p. 44.

²⁴ Franks Davis, p. 48.

²⁵ Franks Davis, p. 54.

²⁶ Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (University of Wales: Lampeter, 2006), p. 2.

²⁷ Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (University of Wales: Lampeter, 2006), pp. 26-29

that will be carried out to complete this dissertation. Hardy identified what, to him, are important differences between religion and theology. He felt that religion is:

“essentially a matter of the spirit, belonging to the realm of emotion and feeling; and theology is *not* a religion, but is the systematisation of the knowledge of religion and the theories put forward by the reasoning mind to explain it and the various kinds of belief”.²⁸

He argued that the scientific study of “nature, man and human history” could enable a greater understanding of a divine being.²⁹ Hardy was influenced by Edwin Starbuck’s work. He admired Starbuck’s empirical approach to studying religious experience describing it as a ‘pioneering’ study.³⁰ More detail will be included under the subheading ‘conversion’ within this literature review. Hardy delivered the Gifford Lectures in 1965, where he acknowledged the important contributions made towards the understanding of our concept and understanding of religious experience by Rudolf Otto and William James, the work of both men will be summarised below.

There are two important arguments within the discipline of religious experience, the perennialist or *sui generis* argument and the constructivist argument. In order to gain an understanding of the interpretation of an individual’s religious experience it is important to understand these. Rudolf Otto, in the early twentieth century, wrote that God’s attributes are more than those which can be described “rationally”.³¹ Accordingly, Otto argued that there is an ineffable “innermost core” to religion and God which is not rational and not adequately defined.³² One’s inner most state of

²⁸ Alister Hardy, *Studies in Religious Experience: The Divine Flame* (Oxford: The Religious Experience Research Unit, 1978), p. 28.

²⁹ Hardy, p. 30.

³⁰ Hardy, p. 88.

³¹ Rudolf Otto, trans. John W. Harvey, *The Idea of The Holy* (Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2010), p. 2.

³² Otto, *The Idea of The Holy*, p. 6.

consciousness he names as being “numinous” and *sui generis* in nature, that is it cannot be reduced as it forms the primary core of all human beings.³³ Otto describes the numinous as being a “special feeling”, the religious feeling may be gentle, all-encompassing or passionate; Otto names it “*mysterium tremendum*”.³⁴ William James’ writing echoes some of Otto’s sentiment. James wrote the “Varieties of Religious Experience” in 1902. When describing ‘mysticism’ James uses the terms “ineffable” and “noetic” for what he describes as “states of consciousness”.³⁵

James studied the experiences of extraordinary individuals who underwent intense religious experiences. James identifies the ability of human beings to have an emotional reaction to beliefs which make up “‘objects’ of our consciousness”.³⁶ He made a valuable contribution to the study of religious experience. James classifies religious experience from a psychological position. His aim was to ask questions such as, what was the nature of the experience, how did it originate, what was the history and context of its setting for the individual?³⁷ He did not wish to study the experience of the ordinary individual whose religion had been gleaned from their cultural traditions but was interested in those who had undergone an “acute fever”, those who have had intense religious experiences.³⁸ James categorised religious experience into “conversion”, “saintliness” and “mysticism”.³⁹ James’ argument concerning conversion will be considered elsewhere in this dissertation.

³³ Otto, *The Idea of The Holy*, p. 7.

³⁴ Otto, *The Idea of The Holy*, pp. 12-13.

³⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1902; repr. 1982) p. 380.

³⁶ James, p. 53.

³⁷ James, pp. 3-5.

³⁸ James, p. 6.

³⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

During the period of the 1980s and '90s there was debate about how to interpret religious experience. The constructivist argument contends that there must be a relationship between experience, one's belief and the language that one uses to describe one's experience. Steven Katz argues that there is no 'unmediated' form of religious experience.⁴⁰ He asserts that one needs to acknowledge that the experience is inevitably moulded by knowledge and beliefs which the individual already has within his understanding of the world. One's previous knowledge of Christianity, for example, sets the perimeters of one's consciousness. Furthermore, the evidence of the religious experience comes from the narrative of the individual. Any account that is narrated to a researcher will have been "experienced" and "interpreted" by the individual. This "interpretation" will be based upon the existing beliefs and knowledge of the individual.⁴¹ Katz writes that the purpose of his argument is to highlight the misconception that religious experience has a shared prevailing core will is common to all religions.⁴²

The *sui generis* or perennialist argument relied on there being a common core to religious experience. Robert Forman argues strongly against Katz's position. He writes of what he terms "pure consciousness events"⁴³, he describes a number of occasions where individuals have been part of a 'religious experience' that is of a 'meditative', 'ineffable' nature⁴⁴, but is apart or separate from the sensory world of emotions. Forman gives examples of people who have reached meditative states within Hindu and Buddhist religions. He argues that language is not an aspect of this

⁴⁰ Steven T. Katz, 'The 'Conservative' Character of Mysticism', in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. by Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 3-60, (p. 4).

⁴¹ Katz, pp. 5-6.

⁴² Katz, pp. 85-86.

⁴³ Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 11.

⁴⁴ Forman, p. 12.

type of religious experience.⁴⁵ Forman continues his argument concerning the link between language and the description of a religious experience. For Forman, the link between language and experience is contingent.⁴⁶ He argues that the relationship between language and experience is descriptive and that the subjects' interpretation of their experience is not altered in any way by the language they choose to use when talking about their religious experience.

Ninian Smart reaffirms Forman's argument when writing of "the purity of consciousness", or "a contemplative state of blissfulness".⁴⁷ Smart writes of the difficulty in describing the noetic quality that exists within a "pure state of consciousness", where everyday thoughts and feelings do not exist.⁴⁸ He concludes by acknowledging that this type of experiential state of consciousness exists 'cross culturally', that it is common amongst more than one religious tradition.⁴⁹ Wayne Proudfoot agrees that whilst beliefs vary across religions and cultures in the world, emotions remain constant.⁵⁰ However, unlike Smart, Proudfoot asserts that the feelings one experiences are ordinary feelings that can be associated with the thoughts and beliefs one has about one's body or mental state.⁵¹

Proudfoot agrees with the perennialist view that religious experience needs to be taken from the perspective of the individual to whom the religious experience has occurred.⁵² For Proudfoot, while emotions can be seen as something that can be

⁴⁵ Forman, p. 95.

⁴⁶ Forman, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Ninian Smart, 'The Purification of Consciousness' in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. by Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 117-129, (p. 119).

⁴⁸ Smart, p. 123.

⁴⁹ Smart, p. 125.

⁵⁰ Proudfoot, pp. 76-77.

⁵¹ Proudfoot, p. 108.

⁵² Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. xiv.

considered 'pure' or 'fundamental' to the individual's beliefs, they cannot be controlled. In terms of interpretation, Proudfoot is clearly constructivist in his approach, he argues that the subject is responsible for associating the experience with their religious beliefs. The religious experience cannot occur without the pre-existing belief.⁵³

The debate between perennialism and constructivism has moved forward in the last twenty years. Ann Taves is an example of an author who has developed new models for interpreting the narratives of individuals who have had religious experiences. She advocates for a method she calls an "attribution approach". This involves changing the terms "religious experience" to "experiences deemed religious".⁵⁴ She writes that this enables one to identify who is attributing the experience as religious and enables one to identify ways in which things are linked to "socio-cultural formations, such as religious traditions and spiritual disciplines". It encourages cross-disciplinary co-operation and enables one to identify a wider range of experiences with the complexity of things which can be considered as 'religious'.⁵⁵ Taves argues that one should view experience as a complex mix which is expressed through behaviours, influenced culturally and through social memories.⁵⁶ Taves suggests that experience is attributable to physical feelings.⁵⁷ These are important considerations when narratives are interpreted both by the subject and researcher and will be applied within this dissertation.

⁵³ Proudfoot, p. 179.

⁵⁴ Ann Taves *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to The Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.14.

⁵⁵ Taves, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁶ Taves, p. 64.

⁵⁷ Taves, pp. 98-99.

Conversion

Conversion has been extensively studied from the perspective of many differing disciplines to include psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology. Classically, the notion of conversion relates to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and a range of other religions or new religious movements. As the research project focuses on Christian conversion, the primary, though not exclusive focus, of this literature review will be upon Christian conversion. Conversion will be introduced with a general definition together with its application in respect to this research. Key research within the disciplines of psychology, anthropology and individual narrative will be presented. Conclusions will be drawn showing how the research can help with providing a foundation to build on for this project.

This literature review does not include the theology of conversion as the topic of this dissertation will focus on women's conversion within a social environment and experiential context in contrast to men. A brief summary has been included as it is an important area. The necessity to convert to Christianity has been written about by theologians for many centuries. For example, Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his writings on grace detailed that people could not know God without his grace and that this is bestowed by the Holy Ghost.⁵⁸ Conversion was written about by Saint John Climacus who wrote the 'Ladder of Divine Ascent', a work which included examples of monastic conversion circa 600 CE.⁵⁹ More recently, Bernard Lonergan was an

⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas On Nature and Grace: Selections from The Summa Theologica*, trans. By A. M. Fairweather (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 138-139.

⁵⁹ R. T. Lawrence, *Conversion, II (Theology Of)*, 'New Catholic Encyclopedia', Vol.4, 2nd ed (Detroit: Gale, 2003), pp. 234-238, (p. 235), <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=walamp&id=GALE%7CCX3407702775&v=2.1&it=r&sid=exlibris> [Accessed 31.10.18].

influential scholar in the first half of the twentieth century. Lonergan classified conversion as falling into one of three groups, intellectual, moral and religious, he argued that individual experience and theory could fall into any of these categories.⁶⁰

Conversion has been defined as originating from the Greek words “*epistrophe*” meaning ‘conversion’ or ‘turning around’, and “*metanoia*” which can mean ‘repentance’ or ‘to turn around’.⁶¹ There is no clear agreement about what conversion means, Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian write that some believe conversion is a “form of pathology” whilst for others it is representative of “an example of human manipulation and coercive power”.⁶² Elysia Guzik offers a valuable definition of conversion, “the process through which individuals decide to adhere to a particular faith community and its accompanying rituals and belief system”.⁶³ Within this dissertation, the term conversion will be used to denote an orientation to a new religion or a deepening of faith within an existing religious denomination.

⁶⁰ R. T. Lawrence, p. 235.

⁶¹ Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, ‘Conversion’ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Lindsay Jones, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), p.1969, http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CCX3424500648&docType=Topic+overview&sort=RELEVANCE&contentSegment=&prodId=GVRL&contentSet=GALE%7CCX3424500648&searchId=R1&userGroupName=walamp&inPS=true [Accessed 01.11.18].

⁶² Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, ‘Conversion’, p.1969.

⁶³ Elysia Guzik, ‘The Search for Meaning: Information Seeking and Religious Conversion’, *Advances in the Study of Information and Religion*, 3 (5) (2013), p. 12. <https://digitalcommons.kent.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=acir> [Accessed on 17.06.18].

Psychological and Sociological approach

One of the earliest scholars to study conversion was Edwin Starbuck, he described religion as being a “life, deep rooted instinct”.⁶⁴ He conducted an empirical study into the psychology of religion, he published his results in 1900. The first chapter in Starbuck’s book concerns conversion. He asked all 192 participants the same questions, 120 were women and 72 men.⁶⁵ He gathered and analysed data for both women and men on the typical age of conversion, their motives to convert, life experience prior to conversion, emotional and physical impact during conversion, what their experience consisted of, conscious and subconscious elements, and how people felt after their conversion experience. Starbuck concluded that conversion was a move by an individual from an internal world to become part of a “larger world consciousness”.⁶⁶

Perhaps one of the most well known people to write about conversion was William James. He was interested in the personal experience of the individual. For James, when an individual ‘converted’, religion became the centre of their world where previously it was part of the margins.⁶⁷ He sought a psychological reason as to how and why individuals convert. James identified that there were rapid and more gradual types of conversion, it was the rapid conversion that was of particular interest to him.⁶⁸ James argued that individuals often converted following a personal crisis of some sort. He reasoned that there were certain “sick souls”,⁶⁹ these are people who

⁶⁴ Edwin Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (London: William Scott, 1900), p. 7.

⁶⁵ Starbuck, pp. 22 – 24.

⁶⁶ Starbuck, p. 146.

⁶⁷ James, p. 196.

⁶⁸ James, pp. 207-208.

⁶⁹ James, p. 247.

are at their lowest, most wretched emotional abode. James believed that once converted, these individuals experienced a “sense of clean and beautiful newness within and without”.⁷⁰ The examples of individuals given by James who converted are exclusively men, he has ignored the experiences of women. James has been criticised for only taking an interest in the psychological state of the individual prior to conversion and effectively ignoring any social or cultural relationships to conversion.⁷¹

In the 1960s and 70s, there was a precipitous increase in interest in conversion and a great deal of research was carried out based on psychological and sociological methods or using a mixture of the two; much of this work focused on the reasons why people convert and what difference they experience in their lives following conversion. In 1962 and 63, John Lofland and Rodney Stark (sociologists) devised a motivational model. They studied an American millenarian new religious movement and based their research upon the convert’s narrative. They asked why people converted, identifying predisposing conditions.⁷² David Snow and Richard Machalek have criticised their work for lacking an empirical basis and for being too particular.⁷³ Henri Gooren implies that Lofland and Stark’s work placed too much emphasis on an individual being in a state of emotional crisis which determined their conversion.⁷⁴ Gooren also points out that the model failed to take account of any variance in

⁷⁰ James, p. 248.

⁷¹ Frank K. Flinn, ‘Conversion: Up from the Evangelicalism or the Pentecostal and Charismatic Experience’, *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. by Christopher Lamb and M Darrol Bryant (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 51-72 (p. 53).

⁷² John Lofland and Rodney Stark, ‘Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective’, *American Sociological Review*, 30 (6) (1965), pp. 862-875.

⁷³ David Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10, pp. 167-190 (p.184).

⁷⁴ Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 23.

conversion due to gender⁷⁵; however, it can be seen as important formative research.

The notion of a model of conversion, examining what predisposed individuals to convert was developed further by Snow and Machalek in the 1980s. They identified aspects of conversion.⁷⁶ Namely that conversion involves a change in personality from old to new, and that following conversion, one sees the world differently. After converting, individuals use their religion as a point of reference for their surroundings, relationships, opinions as well as their internal values.⁷⁷ Gooren is critical of their reliance on determinism, he questions whether converts really have the degree of agency implied within Snow and Machalek's research.⁷⁸ Other theories abound the subject of conversion include work carried out by Ernest Harms in the 1960s. Harms theorised that the psychological state of the individual plays a part in conversion, specifically the subconscious.⁷⁹ He implies that the converter has a degree of agency and determinism, arguing that there are three principle reasons for an individual to convert. The first is that they wish to leave their current religion, there is something wrong with it which has led to unhappiness. The second is that a person who has lived around the cultural influences of another religion, they eventually decide to convert. Thirdly, the individual comes into direct contact with someone from another religion and they are persuaded to convert.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Gooren, p. 24.

⁷⁶ Snow and Andrew, p. 168.

⁷⁷ Snow and Machalek, pp.170-171.

⁷⁸ Gooren, p.32.

⁷⁹ Ernest Harms, 'Ethical and Psychological Implications of Religious Conversion', *Review of Religious Research*, 3 (3) (1962), pp. 122-131, (p. 124).

⁸⁰ Harms, pp. 122-123.

Much has been written concerning the emotional state of the individual and what part this plays in predisposing people to conversion. Pehr Granqvist focuses on attachment theory and conversion from a psychological perspective. He identifies that much of the sociological work concerns the non-deterministic aspects that lead to conversion; that is, changes occur due to extrinsic or intrinsic factors rather than a determined choice.⁸¹ He argues that theories have failed to take account of attachment theory when considering conversion. Granqvist writes that studies tend to show that people who convert suddenly are associated with insecure attachments, people with more secure attachments experience conversion as a more gradual process.⁸² People with secure attachments tend to view God as “loving and caring”, those with insecure attachments tend to view God as “more distant and controlling”.⁸³ Granqvist acknowledges that more work needs to be carried out to establish whether his theories concerning attachment and conversion can be validated.⁸⁴ It can be argued that attachment to the convert’s parents add another dimension to what might predispose individuals to convert.

The concept that from a psychological standpoint a model of conversion is required has been developed by Raymond Paloutzian who reasons that a “meaning-system model” of conversion is needed.⁸⁵ He contends that religion is used by human beings to bring meaning into their lives and that a model which uses meaning as its basis has the ability to bring all aspects of one’s life together. Paloutzian writes that

⁸¹ Pehr Granqvist, ‘Attachment Theory and Religious Conversions: A Review and a Resolution of the Classic and Contemporary Paradigm Chasm’, *Review of Religious Research*, 45 (2) (2003), pp.172-187, (p. 175).

⁸² Granqvist, p. 179.

⁸³ Granqvist, p. 178.

⁸⁴ Granqvist, p. 184.

⁸⁵ Raymond F. Paloutzian, ‘Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation’, *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 11.
<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195338522-e-009>, [Accessed 29 April 2017].

many studies have failed to take account of the complex nature of conversion, it cannot be seen as occurring at a fixed point in time and is influenced by an individual's personality and genetic make-up, their social and cultural background and "other variables".⁸⁶

He argues that the meaning that lies behind what motivates people to do things can be used to tie all aspects of a convert's life together.⁸⁷ Such a system would also allow for determinism within conversion as Paloutzian argues that the model requires that the individual must need or want something, a change.⁸⁸ One such model that aims to cut across all aspects of the convert's life and influences is one that has been developed by Lewis Rambo. He recognised that there was a need for a more complex model of conversion which can account for people's lives holistically, not focusing on limited aspects such as in previous attempts. His aim was to combine aspects of psychology, sociology and anthropology⁸⁹ together to ascertain why and how people convert.⁹⁰

Rambo aims to study "cultural, social, personal, and religious systems" from different disciplines, so adopting an holistic approach to conversion.⁹¹ Rambo proposes a seven stage model detailing the process of conversion, to include "context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences".⁹² He argues that conversion takes place slowly, over a period of time, that it must be seen alongside

⁸⁶ Paloutzian, p. 10.

⁸⁷ Paloutzian, p. 14.

⁸⁸ Paloutzian, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4.

⁹⁰ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 1.

⁹¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 7.

⁹² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 17.

the individual's relationships and desires.⁹³ Rambo's model, despite having many positives as it aims to take account of the nuances of human existence, has been criticised for implying that a crisis point is a pre-requisite of conversion.⁹⁴ Rambo, even by his own admission, fails to investigate whether there are differences between the conversions of women and men.⁹⁵ His model can be seen to sit within the 'micro' and 'meso' levels of the sociological approach to conversion as described by Fenggang Yang and Joseph B. Tamney.

They describe an approach which considers conversion at a 'micro', 'meso' and 'macro' level.⁹⁶ The model which functioned at the 'micro' level was prevalent during the 1960s to 1980s, it would include Lofland and Stark's model. It concerned the convert who progressed from a state of crisis to renewal following conversion.⁹⁷ Work which has been completed at the 'meso' level recognises that people do not live in segregation from a community. In religious terms, this can be interpreted as involvement in conducting rituals or worshipping alongside others.⁹⁸

To summarise, with regard to this dissertation, the psychological approach to conversion has developed comprehensive models that attempt to holistically consider all possible aspects of an individual's life which might have influenced them. This includes culture, social, family and individual history, psychological background

⁹³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Gooren, p. 41.

⁹⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 174.

⁹⁶ Fenggang Yang and Andrew Stuart Abel, 'Sociology of Religious Conversion' in the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 1.

<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195338522-e-006>, [Accessed 29 April 2017].

⁹⁷ Yang and Stuart, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Yang and Stuart, p. 5.

and factors such as how these might interact with wider changes within society. This has provided a basis for the research for this study.

Anthropology

In the field of anthropology, as in other disciplines, there has been much written concerning the study of conversion. The anthropologist Robert Hefner wrote about conversion in the 1990s⁹⁹, he described conversion as being related to the founding of a “reference group”. This, he argued, was “the anchor” to which a person is attached to, a group of people who they feel they can relate to. The reference group with whom one feels allegiance is multi-faceted, one might feel connected to one’s family, religion, gender, race and so forth.¹⁰⁰ An individual’s reference group might change during the course of her/his life, due to a multitude of reasons.¹⁰¹ Hefner therefore adopted an approach that was multifaceted, he recognised that conversion was complex, and that people are influenced for numerous different reasons. He contended that conversion involved a change in the way in which the individual defines herself/himself with a “commitment to a new kind of moral authority and a new or reconceptualized social identity”.¹⁰² Diana Austin-Broos concurs that an anthropological approach to conversion focuses on the “interplay between religion and identity”.¹⁰³

Austin-Broos describes conversion as a progressive journey or “passage” that is particular to an individual or collective which is culture, diverse, social and involves ritual of some type.¹⁰⁴ Anthropological studies into conversion tend to focus on

⁹⁹ Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ Hefner, p. 25.

¹⁰¹ Hefner, pp. 26-27.

¹⁰² Hefner, p. 17.

¹⁰³ Diana Austin-Broos, ‘The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction’, in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, ed. by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 1-12 (p. 1).

¹⁰⁴ Austin-Broos, p. 2.

specific groups of people and their conversion accounts. In contrast, David Knight, Robert Woods and Ines Jindra conducted research into whether women and men communicate their conversion experiences in a different manner.¹⁰⁵ This study was unusual in that it did not focus on why people converted or what occurred during that process, instead they focused on gender and narratives. It analysed both similarities and differences between the way in which men and women tell their conversion stories.¹⁰⁶ It found that men tend to focus on themselves as the central character in their story, women focus on someone other than themselves as the central character. For example, women would tend to talk about how their friends supported them along their journey.¹⁰⁷ Both men and women described their conversion story as a “process”; that is, it took place over a period of time. Less than half of those interviewed described their conversion as a crisis.¹⁰⁸

This study is significant as it concludes that gender is important and creates differential within the narrative of conversion. This is one of the few studies which aims to identify whether there are differences within the conversion experiences of men and women. Differences in gender narrative are highlighted within the main body of the research conducted for this dissertation. The anthropological approach to conversion helps to provide a model which is used for an external background to the individual's life to include their significant relationships both current and previous.

¹⁰⁵ David A. Knight, Robert H. Woods Jr., Ines W. Jindra, 'Gender Differences in the Communication of Christian Conversion Narratives', *Review of Religious Research*, 47 (2) (2005), pp. 113-134.

¹⁰⁶ Knight et.al, p. 120.

¹⁰⁷ Knight et.al, p. 121.

¹⁰⁸ Knight et.al, pp. 124-125.

Narrative

A key issue within the research of conversion concerns whether it is the researcher or participant who leads the narrative. When using a model of conversion, the participant often defers to the greater experience or knowledge of the researcher and their account is aligned with the model. In his phenomenological study of conversion, Mark Wynn enables the participant to lead the narrative. Wynn has written about the conversion of Leo Tolstoy as described by William James.¹⁰⁹ Through examining Tolstoy's account of his conversion, Wynn shows that there is a change in the way in which he, and others, perceive the sensory world following a conversion experience.¹¹⁰ James describes Tolstoy becoming depressed, that his life had no meaning, his world had become grey.¹¹¹ Tolstoy's malaise alters following his conversion, at the same time the way in which he perceives the world around him also changes.¹¹² "A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth."¹¹³ Wynn argues that the way one feels about one's internal spiritual state can impact the way in which one perceives other aspects of one's life such as the sensory world.¹¹⁴ Wynn goes on to write that people consider spirituality to concern "beliefs and ideals".¹¹⁵ In reality it is much more than this; spirituality affects one's emotional state, which in turn affects the way one perceives one's sensory world.¹¹⁶ This is an important study as it might have the potential to highlight emotional differences between the conversion experiences of women and men. In addition, this study also identifies the

¹⁰⁹ Mark Wynn, 'Renewing the Senses: Conversion Experience and the Phenomenology of the Spiritual Life, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 72 (3) (2012), pp. 211-226.

¹¹⁰ Wynn, p. 211.

¹¹¹ James, p. 151.

¹¹² James, p. 185.

¹¹³ James, p. 151.

¹¹⁴ Wynn, p. 215.

¹¹⁵ Wynn, p. 224.

¹¹⁶ Wynn, p. 224.

importance of placing the participant in the centre of their story and enabling them to take the lead.

An alternate model of conversion has been proposed by the Dutch anthropologist Henri Gooren. He stresses the importance of considering factors such as social, institutional, cultural and political, individual factors, and contingency factors, such as an acute crisis.¹¹⁷ In order to trace an individual's 'conversion career', it is necessary to consider their life as a whole, and it is important to consider the interconnectedness between the individual and society.¹¹⁸ Within his approach, termed the 'conversion career', Gooren contends that it is necessary to quality, type and detail of 'religious participation' undertaken by the individual throughout their conversion journey. That is the nature of the individual's state prior to converting, during conversion, and once converted.¹¹⁹ Luc De Backer in his recent PhD has given examples of the way in which conversion can occur slowly or more spontaneously. De Backer recognised that conversion is complex and occurs within the context of an individual's life as a whole.¹²⁰ Gooren does not reflect on whether there are any differences between the conversion experiences of men and women. There are few authors who have considered this subject, one of whom is Susan Juster who researched the "Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America".¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Gooren, pp. 51-52.

¹¹⁸ Gooren, p. 52.

¹¹⁹ Gooren, p. 48.

¹²⁰ Luc De Backer, 'Conversion and Ritualisation: An Analysis of How Westerners Enter the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and Assimilate its Values and Practices' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2016), pp. 147 – 159.

¹²¹ Susan Juster, "In a Different Voice": Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America', *American Quarterly*, 41 (1) (1989), pp.34-62.

Juster studied American writings between the period 1790 to 1830, she reflects that the texts “offer a way of reading male and female conceptions of authority and selfhood”.¹²² She found that women wrote more of their internal sinful nature and this impacted on their relationship with God. Men were more concerned about worldly sins from external sources such as their family or friends.¹²³ She notes that while conversion experiences could be intense and challenging for both genders, there were differences in the way in which God as a figure of authority was perceived and understood.¹²⁴ Generally, she found that women likened God to a someone who was close to them, either within their family or a friend, often a father figure.¹²⁵ Men’s experiences differed in that they associated God with a figure of authority that was external to their immediate circle of friends or family.¹²⁶ Juster develops this difference further by likening men’s relationship with God to a “contract” and women’s to a “covenant”. Men’s association is concerned with a fair and just business agreement; whereas a woman’s connection is more of an emotional promise.¹²⁷

Similarly, Virginia Lieson Brereton studied the recorded narratives of women converting to Protestantism and Evangelical Protestantism in the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Brereton does not compare the experiences of the sexes but identifies recurring paradigms which occur within the accounts from women.¹²⁸ From a feminist perspective, Brereton reflects on what she

¹²² Juster, p. 34.

¹²³ Juster, p. 36.

¹²⁴ Juster, pp. 37-38.

¹²⁵ Juster, pp. 40-41.

¹²⁶ Juster, p. 42.

¹²⁷ Juster, p. 43.

¹²⁸ Virginia Lieson Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women’s Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 3-4.

rightly terms a “subplot”. That is, in the nineteenth century, one can observe the “surface plot”¹²⁹, a woman who moves from an ‘evil’ state of sinfulness to one of acquiescence to God’s will. This, she states, reflects men’s desire for women to submit to their will. Brereton mirrors Juster with a reflection that women’s perception of God can be linked to male figures in authority such as a father or husband.¹³⁰ That the experiences of women and men reflects gender expectations within society can be seen in a study carried out by Lynn Davidman and Arthur Griel. The authors researched whether there were differences in the gendered conversion experience to Judaism.¹³¹

Davidman and Griel identify, as did Juster, that conversion is intense and emotional for both genders.¹³² They discovered that, for women, the Shabbat was important as it represented “family values”, for men, it characterised an opportunity to rest from work.¹³³ The authors made the obvious connection between traditional gendered roles within the participants cultural setting. They found that women were more likely to talk about their family, men were more likely to talk about the morality of Judaism.¹³⁴ They record that one man said, “They [the religion] set standards. A male knows what he has to do. A female knows what she has to do. It takes a lot of confusion out of the picture. It can help, it can help”.¹³⁵ The authors identified that twice as many women as men expressed unhappiness with their religion’s approach to gender.¹³⁶ This difference in the way that women and men perceive their role

¹²⁹ Brereton, p. 28.

¹³⁰ Brereton, p. 28.

¹³¹ Lynn Davidman and Arthur L. Griel, ‘Gender and the Experience of Conversion: The Case of “Returnees” to Modern Orthodox Judaism’, *Sociology of Religion*, 54 (1) (1993), pp. 83-100.

¹³² Davidman and Griel, p. 85.

¹³³ Davidman and Griel, p. 92.

¹³⁴ Davidman and Griel, p. 93.

¹³⁵ Davidman and Griel, p. 95.

¹³⁶ Davidman and Griel, p. 95.

within religion has been extensively written about. Linda Woodhead has commented on the divide between “private and public life” that exists within Western countries. Traditionally, women occupied the “private sphere”, bringing up children and attending to family life. Men dwelt in both “spheres”, “their natural realm is the rationalized, impersonal, secular sphere of public life”.¹³⁷

These studies show that cultural differences in the way that women and men live their lives and their status in society appear to affect the way they interface with their religion. There is a lack of research focusing on whether gender based cultural differences affect conversion experiences.

¹³⁷ Linda Woodhead, ‘Women and Religion’ in *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. by Linda Woodhead et al., (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 384-411, p. 385.

Gender

The third part of this literature review will focus on the gendered experience of women within religion. Various points will be presented which will give a holistic indication of the main arguments which exist within this discipline.

Ursula King has been one of the key contributors to the study of gender and religious studies. She clarifies that the term 'sex' defines the biological differences between women and men; whereas 'gender' refers to "the historically and culturally constructed understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman".¹³⁸ King uses this definition to summarise what she sees as the important questions that needed to be asked concerning gender and religion. What role do women have within their religion, is that role a central one, do they have equal status to men? Have women created their own religious rites, are they separate to ones used by men? How does the religion portray women, are they seen as "strong and powerful"?¹³⁹ What kind of language is used, is it patriarchal? What do the religious writings communicate about women, is it defined by "equality and partnership"?¹⁴⁰ Are sacred images and icons masculine or do they also have a feminine nature? Gender studies tend to focus on women as they have been marginalised whereas men, as a group, have favoured themselves.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Ursula King, 'Religion and Gender', in *Turning Points in Religious Studies*, ed. by Ursula King (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 275 – 286, p. 276.

¹³⁹ King, p. 282.

¹⁴⁰ King, p. 282.

¹⁴¹ King, p. 276.

King defines the greatest problem as being the patriarchal nature that underlies the historical “theological and religious writings”¹⁴² It is usual for women to be either ignored or marginalised within sacred texts that have been largely written by men. Early feminist religious scholars focused upon this issue. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza developed the concept of a critical hermeneutical approach to reading the Bible. She recognised that the Bible reflected and reinforced a view of the world and of life that was representative of men and patriarchy. The language used is masculine and services to legitimise male power and control.¹⁴³ “If language determines the limits of our world, then sacred androcentric, that is, grammatically masculine, language symbolizes and determines our perception of ultimate human and divine reality”.¹⁴⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza understood that language gives meaning to concepts and ideas and that, by definition, it can be used to express one’s values, beliefs and culture. The language of the Bible is one where women are invisible, Schüssler Fiorenza worked towards changing this.

Schüssler Fiorenza was not the first feminist to write about gender issues in religion. One of the foremost scholar’s to do so was Mary Daly, a philosopher and theologian. Daly aimed to re-define the nature of God, she urged women to worship the ‘Goddess’, not simply in a metaphorical sense.¹⁴⁵ Daly urged women to embrace religion in a manner that was more akin to what might now be defined as ‘paganism’.¹⁴⁶ Daly was not alone in developing concepts that involved radical changes to one’s life. Carol Christ is another academic who has written about and

¹⁴² King, p. 283.

¹⁴³ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of a Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. xi.

¹⁴⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, p. xii.

¹⁴⁵ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. xxi.

¹⁴⁶ Daly, pp. xxiv – xxix.

embraced Goddess based religion. Christ is critical of the way in which the Church reinforces the masculine nature of God, not only with the concept of “God the Father” but also within images, symbols and liturgy.¹⁴⁷ Christ argues that the concept of God as a ‘father’ or ‘king’ has been accepted through the centuries, not only because the theologians and philosophers who wrote about religion were men; but also because of the assumption “that women are inferior to men”.¹⁴⁸ For men, Christ recognises, God is perfect, therefore it is not possible to change him.¹⁴⁹ Christ has developed a philosophical and theological argument which is designed to be lived and breaks down many of the traditional patriarchal barriers.

Grace Janzten has identified that at least since the time of the Enlightenment, men have been associated with pragmatism, logic and the ability to be rational. In contrast, women have connected with “emotion, subjectivity and the privacy of the home”.¹⁵⁰ Daphne Hampson is a British scholar who has also been critical of the male associations with God. Hampson draws attention to the hierarchical nature of Christianity.¹⁵¹ She argues that as God is male, man has placed himself in the “female position, humble, passive and obedient”; as man has placed himself in this secondary position, it casts woman as the ‘other’.¹⁵² The historical, cultural and innate differences between genders have impacted irrevocably on the lives of women. They have been linked with being weaker, irrational and more emotional than men. Studies exist concerning the moral decisions made by men and woman and whether differences are present.

¹⁴⁷ Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 26.

¹⁴⁸ Christ, p. 30.

¹⁴⁹ Christ, p. 34.

¹⁵⁰ Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁵¹ Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 125.

¹⁵² Hampson, p. 4.

Carol Gilligan conducted a study to ascertain whether children developed in morally different ways.¹⁵³ Gilligan concluded that there are differences between the choices taken by the girl from the boy. The boy appears to be very clear about his responsibilities, the girl appears to take a more nuanced approach identifying that her responsibilities may vary depending upon different circumstances.¹⁵⁴ Hampson writes that Gilligan's study has been criticised for being subjective and presented in an unscientific manner and polarising the development of the children. However, she points out that Gilligan has been clear in her study stating that she aimed to portray two different types of moral reasoning but the differences between the sexes are not always affiliated in this way.¹⁵⁵

The polarisation of gender can be seen clearly within a study of evangelical family life in the United States. Sally Gallagher examined the structure and dynamics of relationships with a particular focus on gender. The make-up of families is hierarchical, with women having roles that are based upon "the ideals of biblical feminism".¹⁵⁶ It is considered important that men behave as the head of the family, taking initiative and making the key decisions. Being the head of the family is seen as the embodiment of being male and a role that is identified by God in the Bible.¹⁵⁷ The role of women is one of submission to their husbands. Gallagher writes that "husbands defer, and wives submit", this implies that there is a mutual acceptance and respect of what evangelical families consider to be different but

¹⁵³ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.24 – 39.

¹⁵⁴ Gilligan, pp. 37 – 38.

¹⁵⁵ Hampson, pp. 93 – 94.

¹⁵⁶ Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 83.

¹⁵⁷ Gallagher, p. 85.

reciprocal responsibilities.¹⁵⁸ The author quotes one woman as saying “God made man more stable than he did woman. A woman is more emotional”¹⁵⁹ Some scholars have argued that the structure is designed to ensure that men participate in family life or to prevent the accumulation of strife within the family. Gallagher argues that this is not the case, the hierarchical and patriarchal structure is key to the philosophical approach to life and “world view” of evangelists.¹⁶⁰

There are feminist academics who remain part of the evangelical tradition who argue against this hierarchical structure. Virginia Mollenkott is one such scholar who contends that the dominance of men is “unbiblical and anti-Christian”.¹⁶¹ Mollenkott writes that there is a need to better understand the true meaning within the Bible of the functions of women and men. For her, the feminist approach concerns submission on an equal basis.¹⁶² Likewise, Ursula King argues that there is a need to refrain from taking any stance that “polarises” difference between women and men; this encourages men to legitimate patriarchy.¹⁶³ A further argument put forward concerning gender regards the irreducibility of a core religious experience, the phenomenological concept of *sui generis*. One might argue that what is important is not to become fixated upon what the Bible has to say about women or what their roles are within the modern Church; what is important is the experience of communication with God.

¹⁵⁸ Gallagher, p. 103.

¹⁵⁹ Gallagher, p. 166.

¹⁶⁰ Gallagher, p. 174.

¹⁶¹ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, ‘Evangelism: A Feminist Perspective’, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, xxxii (2) (1977), pp. 95 – 103, p. 95.

¹⁶² Mollenkott, pp. 96 – 97.

¹⁶³ King, Ursula, ed., *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 4.

Melissa Raphael draws attention to the work of Rudolf Otto, she identifies that superficially it appears that Otto's concept of the "Numen"¹⁶⁴ is gender neutral. Raphael argues that this is not the case, she asserts that Otto's work is built on "patriarchal ideology".¹⁶⁵ Raphael writes that it is not possible to have an experience which does not originate from the world one experiences, which stems from our values and beliefs. Otto writes from a position that has a world view which is masculine, imperialist.¹⁶⁶ Raphael extends her argument further by reflecting that if women have a different biological make-up and are socially nurtured in a different way from men, it follows that their religious experience must be different.¹⁶⁷ Otto, enveloped in androcentric and patriarchal conditioning would not notice that his view was biased in favour of men. This view is replicated by Fang-Long Shih who concurs that feminism is concerned with values and differing perspectives, she argues that it therefore cannot be compatible with the *sui generis* concept of religious experience.¹⁶⁸ This is an important argument concerning the possible difference between the religious experiences of women and men.

A key development within feminism has been concerning the way in which a poststructuralist perspective has been able to empower women in a way that frees them from patriarchal language. Language is what defines one as a human being, there is no way that one can stand apart from language; without it, one is unable to describe or give context to the world in which one lives. Without language, "no

¹⁶⁴ Rudlof Otto, trans. John W. Harvey, *The Idea of The Holy* (Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2010), p. 12.

¹⁶⁵ Melissa Raphael, 'Feminism, Constructivism and Numinous Experience' in *Religious Studies* 30 (4) (1994), pp. 511- 526, p. 513.

¹⁶⁶ Raphael, pp. 511 – 513.

¹⁶⁷ Raphael, p. 513.

¹⁶⁸ Fang-Long Shih, 'Women, Religions and Feminisms' in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religions*, ed. by Bryan S. Turner (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 222-242, p. 222.

directly knowable reality exists”.¹⁶⁹ Mary Maynard recognises that poststructuralism allows for women to express themselves in a multitude of ways, it releases them from patriarchal ties. Such a vision of the world ensures that there cannot be a ‘generic’ woman, it challenges the sense that a masculine ideal of objective reality.¹⁷⁰

Lene Sjørup has researched mysticism and gender. She defines mysticism as being used by William James, “ineffable, noetic, transient and passive”;¹⁷¹ however, Sjørup broadens the meaning to encompass the participant’s own interpretation. Sjørup noted differences in the experiences of men and women, they occurred within “the narrative structure”, “the imagery of the divine”, “in the settings they reported their experiences”.¹⁷² In addition, Sjørup states that her work indicates that more women than men have religious experiences.¹⁷³ This conclusion is based upon the fact that more women than men have contributed their experiences to the database held within the Alistair Hardy Religious Experience Centre. The flaw with her conclusion lies in that although there is clear evidence that more women than men have contributed their experiences;¹⁷⁴ one is only able to conclude that more women responded to Hardy’s requests for information.

The majority of the gender based and feminist arguments presented above have been made by women working exclusively within the discipline of theology and

¹⁶⁹ Mary Maynard, ‘Beyond The ‘Big Three’: The Development of Feminist Theory in the 1990s’ in *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Darlene M. Juschka (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 292-313, (p. 302).

¹⁷⁰ Maynard, pp. 303 – 305.

¹⁷¹ James, pp. 380 – 381.

¹⁷² Lene Sjørup, *Mysticism and Gender*, Religious Experience Research Centre, Lampeter, Occasional Paper, May 2001, p. 6, <http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/library/alister-hardy-religious-experience-research-centre/occasional-papers/> [Accessed 13 January 2018].

¹⁷³ Sjørup, p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ Alistair Hardy notes that of the first three thousand respondents, over two thousand were female. Alistair Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Lampeter: Religious Experience Centre, 1979), p. 30.

religious studies. There is shortage of collaborative work between theological or religious studies and other academic disciplines. Dawn Llewellyn¹⁷⁵ reminds us that there is opportunity to share ideas and hypotheses with feminists working in other disciplines. She explores possible reasons for this suggesting that the lack of engagement might be present due to feminist links with secularism, “feminists working in religion can be seen by “secular” feminists as religious and therefore politically neutral and traditionalist”.¹⁷⁶ Whilst Llewellyn has a good point, it is possible to draw on theories posited by feminists working in wider academic disciplines. The work of Harriet Bradley and Judith Butler has been utilised within this dissertation. In her work on gender, Bradley argues that gender is a “social construct” and is “politically deployed”.¹⁷⁷

Bradley argues that gender has been used to interpret and classify the world around us according to our understanding of what we perceive around us. One such means of classification is politically, Bradley defines this as “power relations between women and men”.¹⁷⁸ She writes that gender is a “lived experience” in that it shifts and changes depending on who, when and where we are within the world around us.¹⁷⁹ Bradley determines that institutions “operate quite rigid rules, conventions and expectations about gender, which place restraints on people and which they find difficult to resist”.¹⁸⁰ It is easy to see that churches might fall under this category, Bradley contends that such institutions might encourage and reinforce gender differences. She points out that we are able to choose what we do within our lives

¹⁷⁵ Dawn Llewellyn, *Reading, Feminism and Spirituality: Troubling the Waves* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 43-47.

¹⁷⁶ Llewellyn, p. 46.

¹⁷⁷ Harriet Bradley, *Gender* 2nd edition (Cambridge, Polity, 2013), p. 4.

¹⁷⁸ Bradley, p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Bradley, p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ Bradley, p. 26.

but that “structures and cultures” might restrict that choice depending on where one lives.¹⁸¹ Bradley infers that the cultural society in which we live is responsible for shaping gender and that this is different for women and men depending on where in the world they reside. Judith Butler presents an alternative argument, questioning the concept of “cultural construction”.

Butler examines preconceptions of sex and gender in her book *Gender Trouble*. She argues that the idea that sex is binary, something which is biologically defined, is a misnomer, she contends that sex is culturally constructed.¹⁸² This, according to Butler, means that it is difficult to define gender as the “cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category”.¹⁸³ She maintains that sex is formed through culture rather than biologically, therefore, the traditionally viewed link between sex and gender becomes tenuous as gender cannot be the “cultural interpretation of sex”. She also argues that gender as a cultural construct implies that our gender is “performed”, “is always a doing”.¹⁸⁴ Gender is deterministic to some extent, something that is done “without one’s knowing and without one’s willing”.¹⁸⁵ Butler develops her theory over a period of years, and in a later essay defines gender as, “the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes”.¹⁸⁶ Butler’s argument is that gender is in part biological, but also “performative” something that is ingrained in us, that human beings have little agency to step outside of.

¹⁸¹ Bradley, p. 26.

¹⁸² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Francis and Taylor e-Library 2002), p.10.

¹⁸³ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 33.

¹⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

¹⁸⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 42.

There is a need to acknowledge the bias which exists within feminist literature concerning gender and religion. Although this may not be directly relevant to the subject of the dissertation; it is important to be aware that it exists. Much of the academic research and literature that was completed between the 1970s and 1990s was written by white, middle class, heterosexual women and is reflective of their voices and opinions. Dawn Llewellyn points out that the third wave of feminism represents voices of women from outside of Europe, from a range of cultural backgrounds “to understand and nuance individuality and community differently”.¹⁸⁷

Examples of women from other cultures include Meyda Yeğenoğlu who uses the example of ‘Western’ women who are critical of Islamic women who choose to wear the veil. There is widely held view in the ‘West’ that women wearing a veil are oppressed and need help and support to be lifted and liberated from their subjugated states¹⁸⁸. She is critical of the ‘West’s’ assumption that it is representative of “modernity, progress, development, and freedom”.¹⁸⁹ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz writes of the struggles experienced by Hispanic and Latino women in the United States and Latin America. She describes the way in which Mujerista theology has helped improve their lives by encouraging them to participate in Christian faith on an equal basis.¹⁹⁰ Clarice J. Martin writes from a ‘womanist’ perspective. “The term womanist affirms black women’s connection with both feminism and with the history, culture,

¹⁸⁷ Llewellyn, p. 52.

¹⁸⁸ Meyda Yeğenoğlu, ‘Sartorial Fabric-ations: Enlightenment and Western Feminism, in *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, ed. by Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 82 – 99, (pp. 82 – 84).

¹⁸⁹ Yeğenoğlu p. 89.

¹⁹⁰ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, ‘Defining our Proyecto Histórico: Mujerista Strategies for Liberation’ in *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Darlene M. Juschka (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 498-509.

and religion of the African American”.¹⁹¹ Martin explores the concept of slavery within the New Testament; she considers the impact that this had on black women and men throughout history.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Clarice J. Martin, ‘Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation’, in *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Darlene M. Juschka (London: Continuum, 2001) pp. 539 – 559.

¹⁹² Martin, p. 541.

Gender and Language

An analysis of the use of language by both women and men has been included within the study, for example, do they use language in different ways, are different words used, is language a gendered expression? In 1973, Robin Lakoff's seminal book examined the links between gender and language. Lakoff characterised women as being expected to speak and behave as "ladies".¹⁹³ Lakoff implies that women were detached from holding positions of power in the world and that the difference in language use was as a result of this inequality. Lakoff draw's the reader's attention to other discrepancies such as the use of euphemisms in describing jobs. She uses the term "cleaning lady" as opposed to "cleaner" stating that one would not say "garbage gentleman" instead of "garbageman".¹⁹⁴ Jennifer Coates acknowledges that while Lakoff make some broad generalisations, her book did draw valid conclusions which initiated debate and research into the way that language is used differently between genders.¹⁹⁵

Coates approaches the subject by summarising a range of quantitative sociolinguistic studies that have been carried out in the United Kingdom and United States to examine these questions. She adopts a more nuanced approach than Lakoff recognising that factors other than simply gender influence language.¹⁹⁶ In contrast to Lakoff, Coates explores whether stereotypical opinions about the use of language is reinforced when researched. She finds evidence to suggest that in

¹⁹³ Robin Lakoff, *Language and Women's Place* (London: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 9.

¹⁹⁴ Lakoff, p. 23.

¹⁹⁵ Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language* (Oxen: Routledge, 2013), p. 5.

¹⁹⁶ Coates, p. 4.

conversational situations, men tend to dominate women.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore there is some evidence to support Butler's assertion that we are performative with regards to gender; Coates argues that research shows that in generalised terms, both women and men behave differently when the opposite gender is present.¹⁹⁸ Coates' research is not specifically aimed at religious groups but is reflective of society as a whole. By way of comparison, an article written by Tanya Van Wyk focuses on language and gender within religion and theology.¹⁹⁹ She identifies and challenges examples of academic work which reinforces male stereotypes of a masculine God.²⁰⁰ Van Wyk highlights that feminists have spent over four generations contesting the use of gender based language in theology; little appears to have changed. She writes that as a result, a distinct women's theological discourse has developed.²⁰¹ The author reminds her readers of the reason why language is important with regard to power especially through reinforcement of "social norms".²⁰²

From the available literature it can be seen that little if any direct work has been completed regarding the conversion experiences of men and women and whether they differ. It is a subject which warrants further investigation, as identified by Lewis Rambo. As can be seen from this review, there is a large amount of literature that concerns 'conversion'. The most recent and perhaps comprehensive are works by those who have completed models by which to study the subject. The models are useful as they provide a framework within which many aspects of conversion can be

¹⁹⁷ Coates, p. 124.

¹⁹⁸ Coates, p. 143.

¹⁹⁹ Tanya van Wyk, 'An Unfinished Reformation: The Persistence of Gender-exclusive Language in Theology and the Maintenance of a Patriarchal Church Culture', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39(1), a1890. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1890>.

²⁰⁰ van Wyk, pp. 1 – 2.

²⁰¹ van Wyk, p. 2.

²⁰² van Wyk, p. 3.

considered. However, they do not take account for the possibility of a different gendered experience to men. The review of literature undertaken by feminists shows that it is important as religion, in particular Christianity, has been dominated by a patriarchal attitude which has resulted in the oppression of women. Language, ritual and symbols have been used to further the interests of men over many centuries. This appears to indicate that the conversion experiences of women will differ from those of men.

Emergence of faith

Summary of conversion experiences and evidence

This chapter will identify the different factors that have contributed to conversion experiences, how these experiences occurred and what impact they had on the lives of the individuals included within this study. In order to be able to make sense out of the evidence, it has been necessary to identify a means to categorise and structure the information. I have organised the evidence based on aspects of writings by William James, Henri Gooren and Lewis Rambo. The chapter will begin with an examination of whether people experienced a fast or slow conversion and whether this process has been influenced by gender. This section has been shaped by the work of William James. As explained in the literature review, James acknowledges that conversion can be divided into the type of experience that occurs rapidly and the type that occurs slowly over a period of time. There was evidence to illustrate both types of conversion, examples will be included below.

Henri Gooren's "factors influencing religious activity"²⁰³ has been used as the principal method of classification as Gooren uses a broad range of categories which covers the complex components of people's lives. The headings, based on Gooren's classification will include "social", "institutional", "individual" and "contingency", more detail is included within the literature review. Gooren's focus was on the factors that led people to religious conversion, he did not include provision for the impact that

²⁰³ Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 51-52.

conversion had on the lives of individuals. Lewis Rambo, as explained in the literature review, proposed a seven stage model which included consequences to conversion. Rambo argues that any examination of the difference that conversion makes to the lives of individuals will be inherently biased.²⁰⁴ He writes that all religious communities have their own evaluation criteria by which the religious experience will be measured. This means that the consequences of conversion are interpreted in this instance, principally from the perspective of evangelical beliefs. With regards to evangelical Christianity, this is measured by the writing in the New Testament with those who have experienced conversion using this to interpret their experience. In light of this, a section regarding theological factors has been included. Analysis will be conducted reflecting on whether there is a discernible difference in the experiences of women to men. Before analysing the work, I will include a paragraph summarising the questions that were asked to the interviewed participants.

Evidence was obtained from meetings with participants who volunteered to be interviewed and from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) database; sixteen women and nineteen men. Six people were interviewed, four women and two men. Further detail regarding contributions is included in the methodology chapter of this study. Participants were asked to share general information about their background to include where they were brought up, their families, their age, and a little about their lives. They were asked whether their parents were religious, whether they engaged with religious practices as children, if

²⁰⁴ Lewis R. Rambo *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 142.

so, was it a different religion from the one they currently practice? Were there other factors that influenced their religious practices, for example, did or do they have friends who were Christians? They were asked to describe what events led up to their conversion experience. People were asked to reflect on whether they had a religious experience. How did their conversion occur, what kind of timescale did it span? What kind of impact did their conversion have on their lives, their jobs, their relationships? Those interviewed were asked about other changes they made to their lives following conversion. In addition, interviewed participants were asked to describe their relationship with God.

Evidence from the RERC database was disseminated into a spreadsheet, the information collected was separated into the following headings; the contributor's background, to include whether they were raised within a Christian family prior to their conversion; did they have a fast or slow conversion experience; what difference did it make to their life; their description of their experience of God; did they practice Christianity following their conversion; did they include information about trauma or relevant personal experiences within their account? My aim when organising the material was to mirror the questions asked to those who were interviewed. This was not always possible as contributors had shared experiences that were relevant to them. However, the majority of evidence could be categorised according to my classifications. A copy of the spreadsheet has been included within the appendix.

This study used quantitative research as a method of exploring whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men. The word limits of the dissertation coupled with the difficulties in acquiring individuals who were willing to

take part in the study have led to a narrow, but valid, inquiry. As previously mentioned in the methodology chapter, the study is specific and interpretation of data within this chapter cannot be applied in a general sense to gender issues or differences. It is necessary, therefore, to stress that any conclusions reached can only be applied to this dissertation.

Evidence will be presented below using examples from participants who were interviewed and from contributors to the RERC database. The information is presented according to the headings identified at the beginning of this chapter. Accordingly, the first section begins with an analysis of whether people experienced a fast or slow conversion.

Speed of conversion

There was a surprising number of fast conversion experiences within the evidence examined. Examples are recorded below, it is clear from the data that, from those who shared the information, more people experienced a fast conversion. Evidence from the RERC database shows that more men than women included information demonstrating the speed of their conversion. Information taken from the RERC database indicates that of the nineteen men, thirteen identified that their conversion had been rapid, three stated that it had occurred slowly, three did not record this aspect of their conversion. Ten of the sixteen women experienced a rapid conversion, one indicated that it was slow, five did not state whether their conversion was fast or slow. One man gives a vivid description of his conversion:

“He led me to London to a conference where for the first time I heard “singing in the Spirit” which came from the people and yet seemed to be like angels singing. They seemed to be singing with the angels and God seemed to be so close and I felt the reality of Him. I felt a deep remorse and brokenness {sic} flow through me and yet a powerful love. It was the Holy Spirit.”²⁰⁵

A women’s experience from the RERC database reads:

“Without warning God coming down to meet and envelop me, awe-inspiring, yet a completely warm and loving Father, forgiveness, giving me certainty and security. I was able for the first time to worship and adore and respond, to fall on my knees and say “Oh God, I worship thee; never let me go...” Perfect love, perfect peace, easy to love people even because of the love in my heart, Fear gone; I could go anywhere. I believe I was converted that night and that God was with me.”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Religious Experience Research Centre database (RERC) 000437.

²⁰⁶ RERC 000001.

With regard to the six people who were interviewed, of the two men, Participant 6 describes a fast conversion and Participant 3 a slow conversion where faith gradually deepened and became stronger. When asked about his conversion and relationship with God, Participant 3 said:

“I just believed that I had become a Christian. I believed in Jesus and I accepted what I was reading in the Bible as far as I could understand it. I tried to learn more about it, to grow into it, which I did. I went to Church regularly, not just on Sunday, but they used to have a Tuesday service where all the Christians came and then somebody said to me one day, ‘would you like to come to the prayer meeting?’ ...In a way, I began to embrace my faith.”

Two of the women interviewed describe a fast or rapid conversion (Participants 2 and 4) and two defined their faith as growing stronger over a period of time (Participants 3 and 5). Participant 5 is quoted below:

“To be perfectly honest with you, I never had what people call a ‘Damascus Road’ conversion, there was not a moment, I can’t say there is a moment in my life where I wasn’t a Christian and became a Christian. And that’s where I learnt something quite important. Because I think when we talk about conversion experiences, it can be, for a lot of people, that ‘Damascus Road’ experience when something happens, you know God shines the light upon your heart and you just see, you know, your life, your sins, that you need to be forgiven”.

Social factors

This section includes possible influences from family members, friends or acquaintances in individuals' social network. The majority of interviewed participants and contributors to the RERC database had factors which indicate some social religious influence in their lives prior to their conversion. Many of those who were interviewed had close family members who attended church; others had friends who were members of evangelical churches. However, the presence of social factors is not a prerequisite to conversion. For example, Participant 3, one of the men who was interviewed, had no friends or family who attended church or were religious. Seven of the men and six women of the RERC database contributors had no apparent social influences that contributed to their conversion. From the evidence below, it can be seen that both men and women who are Christians and have had a conversion experience have friends or family who attended church or considered themselves to be religious.

Of the people who were interviewed, all participants with the exception of one were brought up in a family where religion was important and had an influence of their lives. Participant 1 describes her early childhood in Zimbabwe as:

"We grew up Greek Orthodox, but I actually went to a Christian school, so [it was] very based on the bible, on biblical principles. As a family, we didn't necessarily go to church in the same capacity as you would as a Christian, as in the Church of England...because we lived in a very rural capacity in Zimbabwe, we would only go to the Greek Church on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter and that type of thing. I was connected to a Christian youth group."

Since joining her Church, she has become very involved within it, "In the teaching of the Word, and obviously that's been materialised into me being involved with the

youth". In addition, other members of her family have been baptised, her father and sister, she describes "God really being at the centre of our whole family". Her mother died of cancer when she was 12 or 13, but prior to this, her mother had been "born again".

Participant 2 was the second woman to be interviewed, she describes being brought up in the "Christian of all Christian environments, that could be because my father is a pastor and my grandfather was also a pastor". Participant 2 went to university in London when she left school in Cardiff. She describes:

"I suppose that I still had that very strong connection [to religion and faith], I wanted to go to church. A lot of it was, I think, connected to wanting to respect my parents as well. It's very hard even now to know what my motives were, a mixture of both".

She was struck by the number of young people within this church and the way in which they behaved:

"And it made me realise, wow, they are very different, very active. It's hard to describe it, yeah, in the service, in what they were doing, in the witnessing to the people".

Participant 6 was brought up in a Christian household, his father was a pastor. He recalled being told by his mother that, "You must have your own [religious] experience". Along with other children of a similar age, he attended Christian camp when he was fourteen years old, one such meeting was, "highly charged" with emotion. Participant 4 was brought up in a Roman Catholic family, she went to a convent school and "took all the sacraments of the Catholic church, communion and confirmation and all those things". She describes having a variety of friends and acquaintances over a period of years who were born again Christians. One in

particular she states was, “quite remarkable in that he was at peace and kind of had a sort of joy about him.”

Participant 5 had parents who brought her up with the Gospel, he recalls that her father was influenced by one of Billy Graham’s meetings.²⁰⁷ Both parents attended evangelical Presbyterian church; as a child, she attended Sunday School, Church and youth meetings. Participant 3 stands out as being the only one of the people interviewed who did not have parents or friends who attended church or considered themselves to be religious whilst growing up.

It was difficult to identify whether the individuals analysed from the RERC database had friends or family that were Christian and the extent of influence that friends, family or other social influences had upon their conversion. This was not a specific question asked by Alister Hardy when he collected the original data, so the results are somewhat unreliable but do give a general indication. Many of the contributors have stated whether they had a previous or existing religious background within their family. Of the nineteen men identified, twelve were brought up or influenced as children by a religious environment, one man entered the ministry and two had parents who were religious. For example, one man identifies that he was “Brought up in a “church-going” family in Scotland”.²⁰⁸ Another man writes that he was “Born and brought up a member of the Salvation Army”.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Billy Graham was an evangelist who gained renown in both the United States and Europe for preaching the Gospel over a period of 40 years. <https://billygraham.org.uk/billy-grahams-story/> [Accessed 17.11.19].

²⁰⁸ RERC 000574.

²⁰⁹ RERC 000653.

Regarding the fifteen women, nine were influenced by religion as children and one was involved in teaching Sunday school later in life. One woman describes a, “strong religious background from both parents of generally Evangelical practice”.²¹⁰ She goes on to describe her religious roots as, “Baptised Presbyterian (English) confirmed Anglican...admitted communicant to Open branch of Plymouth Brethren”. Another woman who contributed to the database writes, “Until I was 21, I was in the ‘I’m as good a Christian as any [camp]”.²¹¹

²¹⁰ RERC 000041.

²¹¹ RERC 000225.

Institutional factors

Many of those interviewed and those who contributed to the RERC database had contact with churches of which they or their family were members prior to their conversion. Institutional factors refer to possible influence from the church or from specific people who might have had an impact. I have included examples from contributors who were raised as children or young adults within a church environment. All those who were interviewed were influenced, to some degree, in their conversion to Christianity by institutional factors, some people were able to describe what the appeal of the church was, I have included these examples where they were shared. Many of the participants identified strongly with Christian values, there was a feeling of wanting to adhere to a spiritual life. The evangelical church (although different denominations) proved a powerful factor in influencing nearly all participants. Billy Graham was an important charismatic leader who proved influential with two participants together with the father of a third. The database contributions illustrate that men's influences, where this was expressed, included hearing a sermon; listening to a man speaking about spiritual healing; attending a meeting of Christian witnesses; Sunday night at a gospel hall; attending church; listening to music at a cathedral; visits to a mission; listening to people talk about their Saviour. Women were swayed by listening to a bishop speaking; an eminent preacher; a vicar; an evangelist preacher; and listening to mass. These factors are present for both genders, there was no difference perceived in the experience of women or men.

Participant 1 describes her upbringing and cognizance of the Greek Orthodox church and Christian church as being "religion based, very rule based, very tradition based".

She describes her family being at a distance from the Greek Orthodox church, “If I’m honest, I don’t think either one of my parents understood what was being spoken about because it was very old school Greek tradition”. This led to a dissatisfaction with this religious denomination and a desire to seek something new. She describes having a friend who introduced her to an Evangelical church, eventually from here, she developed something that led to a “deeper revelation and a deeper connection [with God]”.

Participant 2 acknowledges that she is from a Christian background, she knew that she would have a conversion experience in her life:

“What I was taught in church and what I understood from the bible was that I had to have a personal experience and I was seeking that all through those years [at university] in many ways, but I never really found it. I kind of, because I knew I was in this very Christian background, it was almost like how, what. I’m asking but I don’t didn’t have experience on how, will it ever happen [conversion], will I know?”

Participant 4 spoke of being raised and educated within a Roman Catholic tradition, as a child, “I was quite devout in the sense of attending religious ceremonies and services and I suppose that I believed you had to do the right things to get to Heaven”. She recounts attending one of Billy Graham’s crusades in the late 1980s.

Participant 5 was brought up in a Christian environment, she recalled being told by her mother that, “Your academic studies are important, but nothing is more important than the salvation of your soul”. She attended young people’s meetings of all the local churches in her teenage years, she remembers listening to others giving their testimonies.

Participant 3's first encounter with religion occurred as a result of a chance encounter as a teenager. He, and his friends, became engaged in conversation with some people on the street who talked to him about Jesus and asked him whether he would like to go to church. He recalls having no difficulties in his life, he had a happy and content childhood. He went to church and enjoyed the atmosphere he experienced there. The pastor gave a sermon about salvation which he listened to and was interested in. He describes the language used in the church as being "you're saved, you're born again", "a disciple, a follower of Jesus". He was given a copy of the Bible and was motivated, though he didn't understand why, to read it. He was influenced by Billy Graham; however, this was at a time when he already had a strong faith and belief in God.

A male contributor to the RERC database described being immersed within a religious family as a very young child:

"My parents were devout Anglicans. I was brought up on the Bible. I can remember my mother reading to me, before I myself could read, all the great stories of the Old Testament and the Gospels. As an Anglican I was christened as an infant, confirmed at 14, went to church every Sunday with my 3 brothers and our parents, and all my education was likewise a Godly sort".²¹²

As he grew older, "My view of the Bible grew increasingly broad, that is, I took it to be a collection of historical myths and legends". For the next twenty seven years he did not attend church. He writes that his wife took their two children to church and suggested that he might like to attend, which he did. The sermon was delivered by "a retired missionary", the impact that this had he describes as, "if I'd been pole-axed,

²¹² RERC 000126.

“mind reeling”, he “knew something tremendous had happened”. He had been disengaged with the church for many years, listening to a chance sermon had a great impact on his life and led to a conversion experience.

Another male contributor illustrates his attraction to a “small Apostolic church” by illustrating how he attended with a female work colleague, he describes her as, “notable on account of her infectious outgoing brightness”.²¹³ Of the experience of attending the church, he writes, “I witnessed praying of such intensity as never before experienced, heard the ‘prophetic voice’”.

A female contributor to the RERC database describes being aged 14 and staying on Caldey Island, “I went to Mass one Sunday to hear the music, and had a sudden and completely unexpected sense of the real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament”.²¹⁴ Sometime later, she converted to Catholicism.

²¹³ RERC 000623.

²¹⁴ RERC 000366.

Individual factors

All those who were interviewed and those who contributed to the RERC database had clear personal motivations linked to their conversion. For some, this can be linked to a desire to become more spiritual, to get to know God, to strengthen existing faith. Within the examples included, there are clear instances illustrating both women and men who have had individual factors which drove them towards conversion, again this is no obvious distinction between gendered experiences.

Participant 1 moved from Zimbabwe to Britain in a state of uncertainty, “I didn’t know what the lifestyle would be, I didn’t know what work would look like, but I had faith that God would be there”. Participant 1 was diagnosed with cancer, this has led to her faith being strengthened and deepened.

Participant 2 stated that she:

“Never doubted there was a God, she believed in creation...But in terms of a personal relationship [with God], I didn’t have that during my childhood even though I knew it was to be sought and to be found, I didn’t have that personal connection”.

Participant 2 was aware that she “Needed Jesus Christ” in her life. Participant 4 described being given a “hard time” by her mother who “started to attend church every single day, sometimes twice a day”. This led to her wishing to distance herself from the Catholic church, she could see that it didn’t make her mother “any more content or at peace”. She recognises that for a period in her life she was, “searching for meaning”, she also prayed that “God would reveal himself to me”. Working in a

Christian Aids hospice led to further contact with Christians who she found, “fascinating”.

Participant 5 spoke of how as a child she was influenced by a book she had read regarding the story of a young girl who prayed to God asking him to reveal himself. She realised that, “you don’t become a Christian just because your parents are Christian...I knew it had to be a personal experience”. Participant 3 described how at a young age he was curious about life and the world, “I did start to think about God and about life, this wasn’t brought on by going to Sunday school or anything, I’d never been to Sunday school”.

With respect to contributions from those who shared their accounts with the RERC database, one of the men who shared his experience describes working in India in close proximity to missionaries, he bought a copy of the New Testament, read it and, “when I came to the verse, ‘I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light’, I was filled with a feeling I had never had before”.²¹⁵ He describes wishing to seek out further Christians and explore what their beliefs were. He moved to Cambridge and started going to meetings of the Oxford Group and eventually he “decided to devote my life to finding a way in fellowship and action with others, to make God’s will relevant in both the nation and the world”.

²¹⁵ RERC 000690.

A female RERC database contributor writes, “I am an artist and I was seeking for truth from the age of 16 but I always thought that if I had any spiritual experience, I would not believe in it and would dismiss it as a delusion”.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ RERC 000001.

Contingency factors

Contingency factors relate to matters that were instrumental in an individual's conversion. For example, a personal crisis, an important event which prompted or predisposed a Christian conversion; these are events that are in some way linked to the individual's religious experience. They were not present for everyone; examples have been included below where they were significant. There is no appreciable difference between the numbers of women and men who have identifiable contingency factors to their conversion.

Participant 1 spoke of going through a period in her life that was difficult, this was when she first returned to church some six and a half years ago.

“And if I'm honest, that's when everything around me started to crumble and started to change as it does when God is starting to realign things in your life and readjust things. It was when so much was challenged around my values, around the work I was in, and it was around this time that I started to question so much in my faith and that's when I went through quite a dark time of depression and burn out. Not wanting to be alive, really like questioning God on so much. At the time I had a lot of people praying for me”.

Participant 2 expressed that she was accused of plagiarism whilst studying at university, she said that it was a complicated situation involving a few people. She “Really felt like a criminal, I felt so guilty”. Participant 4 recalls feeling an increasing need to become a Christian, she describes wanting meaning in her life. An experience in Glasgow led to a feeling that “Maybe God had spoken to me and I understood about the Gospel for the first time”. Feelings of increasing desperation added to her desire to be saved by God.

At the time of her conversion, Participant 4 was “quite depressed”, she had “been in a relationship with a Christian man briefly, but the relationship had ended because he was a Christian and I wasn’t, we weren’t compatible really. I was actually devastated and felt almost suicidal”. In addition, she had been house sharing with friends whom she describes as “living a very immoral” life.

There are many examples of narratives from contributions to the RERC database which fall into this category. One account which stands out is written by a man who worked as an officer on board a ship in the Royal Navy.²¹⁷ He describes becoming embroiled in a life of gambling, alcoholism and sex funded by theft and fraud. Eventually he was caught and discharged to prison following a court-martial. After three years, he was released from prison, and continued with his previous lifestyle. He portrays his life with his children and second wife as, “we might have appeared to have everything we desired, but, underneath the façade, all was chaos”. He drank increasingly large amounts, and on occasion became violent. Ultimately, at his lowest point, he was persuaded by his sister to attend a Christian Fellowship meeting which changed his life.

Of the women who inscribed their narratives, one writes that during her adolescence, she was an atheist. In her 20s she records:²¹⁸

“my home life was increasingly miserable and the desire to find some kind of explanation of our existence on this earth & some power which might turn me outwards from myself to love of others

²¹⁷ RERC 000693.

²¹⁸ RERC 000640.

which my reading indicated to me as the only way of salvation reached a quite excruciating pitch”.

There is a point of clarification which needs to be included in this section. There are many illustrations of crises or difficulties in people’s lives which can be used as examples of contingency factors to conversion. They are present for both women and men. However, it cannot be claimed that they are prerequisite antecedents to conversion. There are many more examples of people who do not have contingency factors. There is no example of trauma or crises present in the lives of the other participants who were interviewed or many of those who engaged with the RERC database. For example, a male contributor from the RERC database writes:

“I would like to emphasise that I was not seeking God (I thought I already had Him); I was not troubled or in need of psychological or religious or any other sort of crutch or support. I had not had a traumatic experience which had thrown me off balance...I was fit, unconcerned and unworried”.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ RERC 000126.

Consequences to conversion

The participants who were interviewed and those from the RERC database are all clear that their Christian conversion experience had consequences to their lives and that, in nearly every case, this was sustained for the remainder of their lives. With respect to the subjects who contributed to the RERC database, all describe the experience as leaving them with positive changes to their lives. The men described the changes as a change in friends, thoughts, tastes, interests,²²⁰ a changed attitude towards life,²²¹ increased interest in faith healing,²²² a 'different person',²²³ more peaceful and satisfied,²²⁴ felt forgiven,²²⁵ looked after by God,²²⁶ praying more often,²²⁷ an enhanced career,²²⁸ preaching to others,²²⁹ learnt to forgive others,²³⁰ overwhelmed by guilt,²³¹ ceased to drink alcohol.²³² The women described the following changes, feeling loved and at peace and an absence of fear,²³³ a great joy in reading the bible,²³⁴ becoming a missionary,²³⁵ finding peace and feeling God had a purpose for her,²³⁶ feeling inner vitality and strength,²³⁷ becoming a Sunday school teacher,²³⁸ giving her life to Jesus,²³⁹ gaining confidence,²⁴⁰ joy and physical

²²⁰ RERC 000126.

²²¹ RERC 000221.

²²² RERC 000256.

²²³ RERC 000285.

²²⁴ RERC 000328.

²²⁵ RERC 000340.

²²⁶ RERC 000345.

²²⁷ RERC 000437.

²²⁸ RERC 000397.

²²⁹ RERC 000492.

²³⁰ RERC 000653.

²³¹ RERC 000693.

²³² RERC 000693.

²³³ RERC 000001.

²³⁴ RERC 000102.

²³⁵ RERC 000225.

²³⁶ RERC 000250.

²³⁷ RERC 000292.

²³⁸ RERC 000360.

²³⁹ RERC 000361.

²⁴⁰ RERC 000381.

energy,²⁴¹ God had taken her sin,²⁴² not feeling lonely,²⁴³ finding tranquillity and wellbeing.²⁴⁴ Some aspects of the impact of conversion will be explored in more detail in the chapter on gender, for example, use of language. It is clear that both genders experienced a wide variety of positive outcomes. These outcomes include personal growth and a desire to learn, an ability to see beyond one's self and to consider the spiritual wellbeing of others. A sense of self worth, a sense of gratitude for one's life and finding God. Both genders describe feeling more at peace and contented in their everyday life.

One male contributor described the personal impact that conversion had on his life as:

"I was a desperately shy and introverted individual finding it difficult to relate to others and just having a few very close friends; in the sake of this experience I found God gave me a love for other people that enabled me to be much more outward going".²⁴⁵

There is an example of a woman who states that her Christian conversion has changed the way that she is able to relate to others, she describes the experience as, "Perfect love, perfect peace, easy to love people, unknown people even, because of the love in my heart".²⁴⁶ There are many other examples of women describing a feeling of peace, for example, "I have peace in my heart";²⁴⁷ "It seemed to me I had been searching for peace, and at last I had found it".²⁴⁸ Men also

²⁴¹ RERC 000381.

²⁴² RERC 000079.

²⁴³ RERC 000360.

²⁴⁴ RERC 000698.

²⁴⁵ RERC 005513.

²⁴⁶ RERC 000001.

²⁴⁷ RERC 000102.

²⁴⁸ RERC 000250.

describe feeling peace, “Jesus Christ, who kept my mind and spirit in peace”;²⁴⁹ “Thy sins are forgiven thee & the peace of mind which follows”.²⁵⁰ Two of the women contributors to the RERC database wrote of experiencing “joy”.²⁵¹ The theme of the forgiveness of sins is important, as one man within the RERC database reflects, “time passed I cam[e] to the realisation that the great underlying sin in my life had been pride, and that the Lord in His own certain and sure way was slowly, but very surely, breaking that pride down”²⁵². Both men and women also indicated that they experienced the love of God, a woman wrote, “I was given for a moment or two a vivid sense of the Presence of God, and of His love to all the people in the world”.²⁵³ “I was personally assured of God's love”²⁵⁴ was how one man interpreted his understanding of pacifism in the Second World War.

Many men record changing their career following conversion, for example, “I am now a Director of three Companies” and “I go to Leeds University Adult Education for Philosophy {sic} and social Organisation”;²⁵⁵ another man became a preacher for the Canadian Methodist Church.²⁵⁶ Some of the women also took on different careers, for example becoming a missionary in Thailand;²⁵⁷ another became a Sunday School teacher.²⁵⁸

²⁴⁹ RERC 000328.

²⁵⁰ RERC 000340.

²⁵¹ RERC 000381, 000640.

²⁵² RERC 000693.

²⁵³ RERC 000366.

²⁵⁴ RERC 000653.

²⁵⁵ RERC 000397.

²⁵⁶ RERC 000492.

²⁵⁷ RERC 000225.

²⁵⁸ RERC 000360.

With respect to the participants who were interviewed, there is evidence that their conversion experiences had long lasting affects upon their lives, it has been instrumental in shaping change for all six individuals. Regarding the difference it made to Participant 5's life, she concedes that for many years she felt she was failing the Lord, felt like she was climbing a ladder and falling back down again. She describes how, over a period of time her understanding of Christ changed. She felt that she had needed to struggle, whereas in fact, Christ had already accomplished everything on behalf of human beings. She realised that her position in Christ had not changed since the day she had converted. Christ's act of dying for the sins of humanity had atoned for her sins, she declared "justification" or "just as if I had never sinned". Participant 1 states she had always believed in God, she had worked and moved to Britain and moved away from God despite always having a belief in Him. She was reintroduced to church and started to attend the evangelical church. Initially she questioned her faith and it took two years before she was able to state that she was "walking with the Lord". She described the way in which the Holy Spirit filled her and enabled a stronger, deeper connection with God. For this participant, God is ever present within her life now and speaks to her with compassion.

After living on the margins of a Christian life, Participant 4 formed relationships with Christian friends who reached out to her. She had to learn to trust them, they were kind to her, she took a leap of faith, at times she felt she experienced God near her, she started to pray and felt warmth. She likens her conversion to a light being switched on; God is "revealed". At one point in her life, she describes, "I had an experience where I thought that maybe God had spoken to me and I understood about the Gospel for the first time". Of her actual conversion, she states:

“So, I kind of felt like something major had just happened and that I wanted to be like them [other Christians] and trustworthy, so she asked me to pray. So, I thought I’ve said I will, so I will, even though I’d never really done that properly. So, did and during that time of prayer, I had an experience of peace and joy and, I suppose, what I’d call assurance that I was a Christian”.

She spoke of the changes to relationships within her life, stating that some of her friends and family were unable to accept her conversion and associated change of personal priorities. However, most of the changes that occurred in her life following her conversion were positive, these included completing a degree in Health Science, meeting her future husband and having a family.

Participant 2 experienced a sense of “forgiveness”, “relief” that the thing she wanted had grown into a “burden” prior to her conversion, becoming a Christian was something that she had strongly desired. She recalls feeling “peace” and “light like a bird”. Feels grateful that God has allowed her to have such an experience, since this time, she has “never doubted her faith”. God showed her that there were things in her heart that she did not know, this gave her a different perspective upon her life. Longer term, her faith has deepened, a new journey has begun. She talks of moving from darkness into light. “You have a relationship that you previously didn’t have, somebody that you can embrace”. “Life has been more difficult but more meaningful”.

Reflecting on the long term difference that Christian conversion has had on the women participants, they describe having faith in God, trusting that He will look after them. One participant described how God had “realigned her life”, given her a “new

career”, and had “plans and purposes” for her. Another participant described the way in which God had “put her life into perspective” she had been in “darkness” and now lived in “light”. She has a relationship with God that she didn’t have previously, also her family relationships have strengthened and deepened. For another participant, her faith has deepened, her life has become more difficult in some senses but also more meaningful. Another woman participant wonders whether she would still be alive due to the destructive nature of her life if she had not become a Christian, she now lives her life according to biblical principles.

Participant 6, when asked what impact his conversion experience had on his life, states that for the initial six months after his experience occurred, he was “full of it”. He describes that later, when he reached the age of seventeen but still at school, he felt “a change of gear” becoming more “earnest” in his relationship with God, he involved himself in church meetings. He describes the change in his relationship with God, aged twelve, as being black and white. He refers to the experience as “being saved”, he felt a part of the ministry from this point.

Participant 5 developed a personal relationship with God, he believed he had become a Christian, he believed in Jesus and accepted what he read in the bible. He describes “growing into Christianity”. He says that as a young man, “I began to embrace my faith”, he was aware that he had discovered something “precious”. Prayer, bible study was important, he developed a Christian “way of life”. He learnt about right and wrong, He realised that the nature of God is “pure, good, just” and he wanted to stop sinning, to mirror the nature of God in his life; love and forgiveness

were characteristics that he strived towards. Both male participants joined the ministry, becoming a vicar and a pastor.

Theological interpretation

Some of the people who have contributed to the RERC database record the impact that conversion had upon them in terms of their understanding of the New Testament, Gospels and God. For example, one man records:²⁵⁹

“As I read those words in the context of Paul’s conversion my own conscience was pricked in a very significant way but at the same time the room where I was praying was filled with a sense of the presence of the risen Christ and I was assured that he had died for me and I could be forgiven the things in my life that I was ashamed of and that if I allowed him to come and share my life I could find an inner strength to become a different person”.

A woman contributor to the RERC database writes that she realised “What it meant to be a Christian, the reason why Christ had died and the reality of sin”.²⁶⁰ Another women contributor writes that she went to mass to listen to the music, “And had a sudden and completely unexpected sense of the real Presence [of God] in the Blessed Sacrament”²⁶¹

Many of the participants who were interviewed also interpreted their conversion experiences through the Gospels. For example, Participant 5 describes being at a weekend Christian conference for young people. She was approached by the minister and asked if she was a Christian:

“I said no, but it’s what I long for more than anything else in my life, because I know that I will not be right with God until [this happens]. I said I’ve never known. I’ve heard people give testimonies and they talk about it, but it’s never happened to me.”

²⁵⁹ RERC 005513.

²⁶⁰ RERC 000225.

²⁶¹ RERC 000366.

“He pointed me to a verse of Scripture, Philippians chapter 1:6, He who has begun a good work in you will continue it until the day of Christ Jesus, and I felt a real peace and assurance from that point on. The Lord has His hand upon me, he has begun his work, because I want this.”

It was very important for all of the people who were interviewed to share their understanding of what being a Christian meant. This was summed up by Participant 3 who explained during his interview what the meaning of being ‘saved’ or ‘born again’ or ‘Christian’ was. He explained that:

“You are born again by believing in Jesus. So that the Spirit of God creates that experience and that operation of new birth on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ and the Easter story”.

“There is enough Scripture to support that Jesus died for our sins...so that we may be forgiven and that creates a conversion.”

“The ‘born again’ is the same as belief, if someone genuinely believes that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour and makes confession of that and they repent then they are born again of the Spirit of God or they become a Christian.”

The way to become converted is therefore through interpretation of the Gospels as they are in the New Testament. This includes a firm belief that Jesus is their saviour and the son of God and that he died to save people from their sins; this is made possible by God. This point is noteworthy because this is the means to convert to Christianity. Seen in such a way, there is no obvious or clearly defined difference between the conversion experiences of women and men.

Conclusion

I have presented a range of examples of conversion experiences from interviewed participants and from contributors to the RERC database. These have been interpreted using models from William James, Henri Gooren and Lewis Rambo. An analysis of the speed of conversion demonstrated that fewer women made reference to this. Subsequently, a few more men than women identified having a fast conversion. Equal numbers of men and women experienced a slow conversion. It is difficult to reach any firm conclusions from this as the samples were small and much of the information was gleaned not from direct questions but from the RERC database.

Contributory factors to conversion were examined, these included social, institutional, individual and contingency reasons. They were evaluated for differences in gender. Both genders had a mix of life elements that can be identified as reasons for conversion, there were no clear differences between women and men. When looking at the consequences of conversion, the study found out that such experiences can have an impact on both women and men in a lasting way. There was a large amount of evidence suggesting that both women and men interpret their experiences theologically, specifically through the Gospels and New Testament.

To summarise, use of conversion models has failed to identify any clear differences between the conversion experiences of women and men. It is important to take account of the fact that the data does not support general statements due to the small quantitative sample, however it does illustrate certain points as demonstrated

within the text. Further exploration will be carried out in the next chapter to establish why this is so.

Gender significance

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore whether there were gendered differences between the Christian conversion experiences of women and men. With reference to the literature review, there is ample evidence to show that this area of conversion has not been studied in depth and that there is a gap in the research which is worthy of further exploration. Some of the research was completed using the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) database and some via interviews with members of a Cardiff based evangelical church. The hypothesis was that as gender plays a role in all aspects of our lives, there would be clear differences displayed in women and men's conversion experiences. It was unexpected that gendered experiences, at least superficially, appeared to be very similar with little to distinguish with regard to the expected differences.

Reasons for the difficulty in finding supportive evidence to meet the hypothesis will also be presented and analysed. Differences in the experiences of men and women will be illustrated, these will include examples from the participant interviews and RERC database. Common themes have been determined, these include language, metaphors and power; sexual ethics and morality. The second part of this chapter will focus on the argument presented by some of the participants that conversion is not gendered. This will be linked to the New Testament which, according to those interviewed, form the foundations for conversion. The work of Judith Butler will be used to support the premise that gender differences are present but are largely invisible or too subtle to easily notice.

Language

This section explores whether women and men use language in a different way, for instance whether they include specific metaphors when describing their situation or feelings. Women and men use different language and words to describe their actual conversion experiences. Differences are to be expected as demonstrated by Jennifer Coates who writes about gendered discourse, “There is no neutral discourse: whenever we speak we have to choose between different systems of meaning, different sets of values”.²⁶² The way in which human beings speak, is based on the concept of their gender, such a paradigm is difficult to resist as it is deeply embedded in one’s unconscious mind.²⁶³ This section will also include examples demonstrating the manner in which, when interviewed, participants speak from an embodied perspective; that is, the language they use is physical in nature. Similarly, Coates reflects that, “gender is not just a cultural construct – it is also a physical reality”.²⁶⁴ Within this section on language, there are common themes which have been grouped together to include sin and relationship with God.

The interviews illustrate that women’s narratives, in particular, focus on their relationship with sin prior to converting as seen below. Participant 1 speaks of her former life, “I led a very worldly life and got into a career, all about worldly terms, all about money, going out and that sort of thing”. Participant 2 describes a complex situation that occurred whilst she was a student, this had a profound impact on her:

²⁶² Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 216.

²⁶³ Coates, p. 220.

²⁶⁴ Coates, p. 220.

“I really felt like a criminal, I felt so guilty, it was just a way of me realising that I am able to do things, like you know, deceitfulness, if you are put in the right situation. There are things in your heart that you don’t know, I think God was showing me those things, to show me other things about myself.”

Participant 4 defines herself as being “Quite mixed up really”. She recalls feeling “dirty” and “ashamed” of herself in the company of her Christian friends. She describes living in a house with two other friends who were “living very immoral and, I suppose, destructive lifestyles”. She had a Christian friend who became concerned for her feeling she was in the middle of a:

“battle between good and evil or darkness or light or something, I was being pulled back and forth”. “I’d been feeling very despairing and ashamed of myself. I know that I was a sinner and I felt like what I’d done with my life, I didn’t want anyone else to know how bad I was, but God did know and I wouldn’t go to heaven and the only place would be was hell.”

Participant 5 describes “I knew it had to be a personal experience. It was really hard for someone from a Christian home”. She talked about how others in the youth meetings she attended would give their testimony: “And I used to do this and used to do what they’d say, I behaved this way and I behaved that way. Then God revealed himself to me or I asked Jesus into my life”. She remembered thinking to herself, “well, I’m not that bad. I’ve never done these things. I should emphasise, I was always good, in that sense...I didn’t rebel, I did what my parents wanted me to and behaved how they wanted me to, but I know that wasn’t enough”. She felt considerable pressure to let Jesus into her heart, but because she had not sinned, this was a difficult task.

The women from the RERC database describe sin as I “went to hear a bishop preach and realised why Christ had died and the reality of sin”.²⁶⁵ After listening to an eminent preacher, I was “greatly moved and wept copiously”.²⁶⁶ Aged nineteen she “realised she was a sinner and she needed to repent as Christ had died for her”.²⁶⁷ Another contributor said that she went to see an Evangelist preacher, he told the congregation that God loved everyone and that He had sent Jesus to the world to die for the sins of humanity. “Then she saw herself as a sinner”.²⁶⁸ One woman describes feeling a power outside of herself, she knew that “Christ had taken her sin, God had spoken to her” and fulfilled her desire for “salvation”.²⁶⁹

Of the two men who were interviewed, only one made reference to sin within his life. His conversion occurred when he was twelve. He acknowledges that, “It might sound strange that a twelve-year-old son of a minister would see himself as a great sinner but it’s true in the sense that the heart doesn’t have to have committed things to have the potential within it” (Participant 6). The men responders within the RERC database describe in a similar way, a “crushing sense of sin”,²⁷⁰ “you cannot serve God and mammon”,²⁷¹ and regarding the way in which God can forgive sins, one man wrote of how his “understanding of how Jesus is God and can forgive sins, deepened”.²⁷² These examples show that there are some differences between the way in which women describe the need to be cleansed of their sin whilst men describe a requirement to abstain from sin. The next section examines the

²⁶⁵ RERC 000225.

²⁶⁶ RERC 000250.

²⁶⁷ RERC 000292.

²⁶⁸ RERC 000361.

²⁶⁹ RERC 000079.

²⁷⁰ RERC 000256.

²⁷¹ RERC 000285.

²⁷² RERC 000340.

differences that exist between women and men's accounts of their relationships with God.

Participant 1 (a woman) said that "God would help me through all of that", she stated that she is "Walking with the Lord". This phrase suggests some sort of partnership but is not meant in the literal sense as the participant goes on to describe that she "left that career not knowing what was going to happen and started to realign in the plans and purposes that God had for me". This suggests a more paternal figure who is there to look after and take care of her. God provides for her, "I prayed, and I fostered for a husband, that the right person that God had for me". She goes on to state that "I feel that no struggle is too big with God". "I always feel a lot of inner peace with God". When reflecting on the time prior to her conversion, she stated, "I guess probably what happened was God knew there was bigger plans for me to do, but I had to go through that stage of re-refinement". "I started to realign in the plans and purposes that God had for me."

Participant 2 (a woman) when talking about her conversion experience describes, "I...felt like Jesus Christ was almost embracing me all the way round". When asked about what her relationship with God is now, she said, "Before you were in darkness and now you are in light and you have this relationship you didn't have". "Almost like this person you never knew is...Like having somebody that you write to over the internet, the difference is that you can actually embrace somebody in real life". "It was a mixture of relief and peace". "I felt like really light, I felt like a bird". Reflecting on what was happening prior to the experience, she states, "I think that slowly, God

was working in my heart". This participant describes God using paternalistic, father-like terms. This paternalism is similar to the description used by Participant 4, below.

Participant 4 (a woman) describes her conversion experience as, "God drew near and said everything was alright" (this is a metaphor taken from the bible, James 4.8, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you".) She describes feeling a sense of "peace and joy". When asked about the impact that her experience had on her life, she reflected, "Sometimes I think...I'd wonder if I'd even be alive because I was living probably quite a destructive life". "God has His hand upon people", this metaphor reflects a paternalistic understanding of God, it is reminiscent of a father type figure who is guiding his children.

The women's accounts from the RERC database include the following impressions of God following their conversion experience, "Without warning God coming down to meet and envelop me, awe-inspiring, yet a completely warm and loving Father, forgiveness, giving me certainty and security"; "Perfect love, perfect peace"; "fear gone".²⁷³ "I felt a power outside myself", "I knew that God had spoken to me".²⁷⁴ "I have peace in my heart".²⁷⁵ "A superhuman power...whom I call a personal God"; "I suddenly had this warmth of heart as it seemed God spoke to me, "Your times are in My hand. I've been in control of this situation". "He is there when you stretch out a hand and need help, He's equally there when there is a need for correction and rebuke".²⁷⁶ "I had been searching for peace and at last I had found it"; "the Glory of the Lord was with me. It was as if I had been blind and now I could see the meaning

²⁷³ RERC 000001.

²⁷⁴ RERC 000079.

²⁷⁵ RERC 000102.

²⁷⁶ RERC 000225.

of God's purpose for me".²⁷⁷ "Gradually a feeling of inner strength and vitality has developed"; "I am amazed at how power has been given me to survive all sorts of crises".²⁷⁸ "I felt such peace and quietness"; "I've never been miserable since or lonely".²⁷⁹ "He comforts when everything is wrong all around me." "He speaks His wonderful peace and all is calmed."²⁸⁰ "I saw the vast arch [of a large Gothic church] filled with a pure white light in the form of the Christ with the extended arms of "Come unto me."²⁸¹ "I was flooded with such a sense of being touched by an almighty & beneficent power as is impossible to describe. I went to sleep filled with joy. When I woke, I mentally reached out to that same Being & found him/her/it still there."²⁸²

By way of comparison, of the male participants who were interviewed, Participant 3 said that his conversion was "very real, but it wasn't that I had lots of feelings, I just believed that I had become a Christian". "The moral and ethical side of me was changing to a Christ like figure". That is, "The nature of God is pure, good and just". In contrast, Participant 6 did feel emotion during his conversion, he "cried to the Lord"; he describes feeling a "powerful presence in my heart and [God] had heard my cry and had answered my prayer and I was forgiven"; "I had a sense of peace". He describes feeling as if "a weight had been lifted off my shoulder". Similar to the woman Participant 4, he describes a sense that "God drew near, and I drew near". Examples from the RERC database are as follows. "There was a sudden freeing within and a swift indescribable illumination of mind, so subjectively vivid that I

²⁷⁷ RERC 000250.

²⁷⁸ RERC 000292.

²⁷⁹ RERC 000360.

²⁸⁰ RERC 000361.

²⁸¹ RERC 000381.

²⁸² RERC 000640.

fancied a change even in the light around me”; “An exquisite sense of relief and peace”; “A new deep belief in the existence of God”.²⁸³ “Eventually I realised that the only logical thing to do was to give myself wholly, in every respect, to my creator, and on my knees I told God (aloud) that I would be His for all time. I immediately knew that I was a new person”.²⁸⁴ Gained a sense of “peace which only comes when divine forgiveness is, in faith, accepted in the heart”;

“Conversion is an emotional experience, an experience of the heart. I do not mean a hysterical experience which has to do with “feelings” which in the light of the following morning have disappeared, but rather a joyous certainty which prompts a man to say I KNOW that my REDEEMER lives; what joy the blest assurance gives”.²⁸⁵

“I felt a deep sense of remorse and brokenness flow through me and yet a powerful love”; “Again, after the laying on of hands, I felt this wonderful power surging through me, and I felt as if I was floating”.²⁸⁶ “I was personally assured of God’s love and that however difficult the decision I had to take, or its consequences, He would be with me.”²⁸⁷ “I stood face to face with my Lord Jesus and committed my life into His hands. There and then for the first time in my life I was overwhelmed with an immense sense of guilt.” “He has taught me not to try and solve my problems in my own way but to always look to Him for help and guidance.”²⁸⁸

There is a gendered element of giving oneself to God in a more passive way as a woman. Men do not describe God in the same way though there is an acknowledgment that God can “flow through you”. Following their religious experience, many of the RERC database accounts from both genders describe feeling peaceful and feelings of relief. Women and men refer to a belief or knowledge

²⁸³ RERC 000221.

²⁸⁴ RERC 000285.

²⁸⁵ RERC 000340.

²⁸⁶ RERC 000437.

²⁸⁷ RERC 000653.

²⁸⁸ RERC 000693.

that God loves them; they describe Him as being more powerful than human beings. However, seen as a whole, the narratives of men tend to be less emotional. Women describe their experience in a more physical way, relating the way in which God or Jesus has touched them. For women, the evidence suggests their attachment to and dependence on God in a hetero-normative way, as a paternal or husband like figure. The men did not use similar metaphors. God helped women feel complete and enable men to feel fulfilled. There is some evidence that men use different words from women, such as “crushing” and “surging”, while women use words such as “certainty” and “security”. More research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, the data suggests that language can be seen to be used differently by women from men. The insight confirms Tanya van Wyk’s argument that, “Language does not only create and shape beliefs about gender, but language also maintains it”.²⁸⁹ In this context, it can be seen that there is a difference in the way in which one of the female participants views God as a father like figure and the way in which one of the male participants views himself as becoming more of a Christ like figure.

²⁸⁹ Tanya van Wyk, ‘An Unfinished Reformation: The Persistence of Gender-exclusive Language in Theology and the Maintenance of a Patriarchal Church Culture’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39(1), a1890. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1890>.

Sexual ethics and morality

Many of the interviewed participants raised the issue of sexual ethics and morality during the interviews. This was not a question which had been originally considered within the research. However, the interviews have shown how important it is within the conversion experience. Women and men stated that they live their life according to biblical principles, specifically those identified within the New Testament. Accordingly, a brief analysis of references to sexual morality in the New Testament and, as appropriate, the way in which they reflect gender differences has been undertaken.

The New Testament makes many references to sexual morality, for instance, Gal. 5.24, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”; 1Thess. 4.3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication”; 1 Cor. 5.11 warns against being, “Sexually immoral or greedy”; and 1 Cor. 6.9 states that “Fornicators, idolaters nor adulaters’, male prostitutes, sodomites...none of these will inherit the kingdom of God”. Adrian Thatcher writes that marriage, traditionally is the “framework” for Christian sexual relationships.²⁹⁰ A study conducted by Hardy and Willoughby notes that it is common for many Christian religions to view sex and sexuality as a moral concern. Sex is an act aimed at reinforcing the commitment and love of husband and wife and the intention of bringing new life into the world.²⁹¹ Hardy and Willoughby also found that it was common within Christian groups for the belief that chastity, that is sexual

²⁹⁰ Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) p. 76.

²⁹¹ Sam A. Hardy and Brian J. Willoughby, ‘Psychology of Religion and Spirituality’, *Religiosity and Chastity Among Single Young Adults and Married Adults*, 9 (3) (2017), pp. 285-295 (p. 285).

abstinence outside of marriage, should be observed.²⁹² This view is reinforced by both the interviewed participants and narratives from the RERC database accounts. Similar views were expressed by both women and men with regard to sexual morality.

Participant 1 stated that when she met the man who would become her future husband, she “didn’t want to live together before marriage. I was doing the complete opposite to what people of my generation were doing. And I know that God blessed me for that”. They waited till after marriage before beginning a sexual relationship. The participant states, “God opens up a different part of your heart when you wait”, she concludes that if she hadn’t been “walking with the Lord”, this wouldn’t “have happened”. “We’ve got so deep in many ways because of having waited till we got married”. Participant 4, a woman, reflects that her life was “quite immoral” in many ways, “I drank a lot and smoked a lot”, “I was working in an Aids hospice, Aids was very prominent in the media, I even got myself tested at one stage”, she had “not taken precautions”. Shortly after her conversion, she went to study at a university and states that it was like she “had a double starting of a new life, because nobody knew me there. I just threw myself into the Christian Union and to finding a church”. This was also associated with abstinence from drinking alcohol, not smoking and “I tried to live my life according to biblical principles”.

The male participants shared similar sentiments regarding sexual morality.

Participant 3 spoke of what occurs when an individual becomes a Christian. He described that their character changes, it might need to be changed in “some moral

²⁹² Hardy and Willoughby, p. 292.

sense and a spiritual sense". He gave an example of an occasion when, as a young man, he went to a party arranged by colleagues from work. "After a while, things got a bit too edgy with morality". He stated that he left the party early because of this, it was not because he was being "prudish" but he "just didn't want to do that kind of thing". At the same time, he "started to think of helping people and being thoughtful to people and not just dismissing people". The participant said that he was "brought up spiritually to acknowledge that people are born in the image of God". He stopped swearing at this time.

With regard to the contributions examined within the RERC database, one of the male contributors, states that he had an emotional "breakdown" before his marriage, later, two of his children died. He believed that this was due to his masturbatory habits as a child, he had read a book at the time which told him it was wrong.²⁹³ A second male recalls drinking and gambling prior to his conversion, he describes his behaviour as having "ambitions to be a professional gambler".²⁹⁴ A third male account describes, "He [God] came to show us the way back to the Kingdom of God, to break the power of Satan over man". He goes on to describe, though not in specific terms, "I back-slid into many sins before I cried out to God to help me".²⁹⁵ Another male contributor to the RERC database recalls that prior to his conversion, he describes himself as being in "moral, spiritual and virtual financial bankruptcy".²⁹⁶ Before his conversion he lived by, "fraud, cheating, borrowing and even theft" He used alcohol, drugs and took part in "illicit sex", he also beat his wife. After thirty years, his family persuaded him to attend a Christian Fellowship meeting where he

²⁹³ RERC 000340.

²⁹⁴ RERC 000397.

²⁹⁵ RERC 000437.

²⁹⁶ RERC 000693.

converted. He describes going to another meeting the following night where, “I had three whiskies at a meeting when I normally would have drunk a bottle or more, and I thank my Lord that those three drinks were the last I have ever had”.

A second man writes in the RERC accounts, that he did not attend church as a young boy or man, he left school aged twelve to start work in a cotton weaving shed. He recalls how, like other young boys, he masturbated regularly.²⁹⁷ He then read a book which condemned this practice and cautioned that “it could end by the person concerned being confined in an asylum”. This frightened him and he stopped. However, the fear of lasting damage grew in his mind, he became suicidal and was admitted to hospital, he almost broke off his engagement. He read a copy of a Jehovah Witness ‘Watch Tower’ which suggested to him that he could be forgiven by Christ for his sins, this was instrumental in changing his life.

Within the RERC database, there are fewer female references to morality. One contributor writes that she does not wish to give the impression that prior to her conversion she was a “straight-laced prude”, she describes herself as having “disastrous liaisons (emotionally) and prolonged attachments which of course were doomed from the start”.²⁹⁸ One of the conclusions reached in Hardy and Willoughby’s study is that, “Psychologically, religious doctrines and norms might lead to a healthier sexuality and psychosocial functioning”.²⁹⁹ There was no discernible difference in the way in which women and men approached sexual morality. There is

²⁹⁷ RERC 000340.

²⁹⁸ RERC 000698.

²⁹⁹ Hardy and Willoughby, p. 293.

a clear link between the Christian concept of morality and sin with reference to the New Testament.

During the course of the research, many of the participants who were interviewed used the New Testament as reference for their conversion. Participant 3, a man, clarified what was involved in the Christian conversion experience of evangelical Christians:

“Jesus died for our sins, so we may be forgiven, this creates conversion. Born again is the same as belief, if someone genuinely believes that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour and they make a confession of that, and they repent, then they are born again of the Spirit of God and become a Christian”.

“We are born of the Spirit of God, he begets us. In the concept of the Trinity, God loved the world, his son died for the world and the Spirit begets us into the family of God.”

“It’s all due to God [the participant’s life and career], there is nothing I’ve done or any minister, except we just respond. So, I am a broken sinner, as it were, but repented. I haven’t become perfect by any means but because of my relationship with God, because I’m reconciled to Him now through Christ, I don’t want to let Him down.”

A passage in 1 John 3:9 is an illustration of the way in which Christians view their relationship to God through sin, “Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin because they have been born of God”. Further reference was made to sin by a women participant. Participant 5 explained conversion in the following way:

“You will meet a lot of people who will say, I’m a Christian but their idea is “I do my best and I try my hardest”. There isn’t actually anywhere in the Scripture that says those who do their best will get to heaven”.

“Your heart is sinful and unless Christ comes and shows you that, and you acknowledge, yes I am a sinner and not what I should be, then you will not be converted to a Christian.”

Some of the participants who were interviewed reflected on what the findings of the research might show. They felt that there would be little difference between the conversion experiences of women and men. Superficially, this appears to be the case as demonstrated in Chapter 3, however, as shown above, there are important differences in interpretation. The evangelical understanding of conversion is interpreted, by those interviewed, through the words of the New Testament. The people who were interviewed relate to the New Testament as if it was written for them, in a literal sense. The following words of Participant 5 are an excellent illustration of the juxtaposition of modern life alongside biblical life, “Christ died for our sins; he took them away. We still live in the world and still do wrong things. Paul called himself “the chief of sinners.” The focus lies not on gender but on the way in which human beings can be redeemed through acknowledgement that they are sinners and through recognition that Jesus died to save them. This provides an explanation of why it is difficult to find supportive evidence for the hypothesis that women and men experience conversion in a gendered manner. This is further demonstrated in the following section.

Gender and the New Testament

Participant 6 indicated during his interview that conversion experiences are the same for both women as men, he qualified this by stating that the New Testament regarded women and men as equals, “I would take the line, if it [conversion] was different, you would expect to see a difference in the Scripture as well. Our experiences in the Scripture do match up”. There are references within the New Testament which demonstrate the interviewee’s statement. For example, Galatians 3.28, is a well-known text which has been used to support an argument that there is gender balance with the gospels,³⁰⁰ “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. Ostensibly, this text appears to proffer the same rights to women and men. To contextualise this, generally when the New Testament was written, women and men were not treated as equals. Colleen Conway writes stating that during the historical time when Jesus lived, men were considered to be higher in rank than a woman.³⁰¹ She argues that during this period there was a strict hierarchy of nationalities and gender, women were ranked below all men with the exception of slaves. Therefore, although Jesus might have had relationships with women, it is doubtful that those relationships would have been based upon equality.

Participant 6 refers to the role of women again in the New Testament, but specifically in relation to Jesus, “And you’ve only got to look at the life of the Saviour, the place of women is very, very prominent”. There are indeed some examples of communication between Jesus and women within the New Testament. For example,

³⁰⁰ Barbara Crandell, *Gender and Religion: The Dark Side of Scripture* 2nd edition (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 120.

³⁰¹ Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 15.

Jesus has relationships with named women such as Mary Magdalene, his mother Mary, Mary mother of James and Joseph and Martha. At the time when the New Testament was written, it would have been uncommon for women to be treated as equals to men. Whilst it is not suggested that Jesus adopted such an approach, there is evidence that his relationship with women can be considered as standing up to cultural norms which was unusual for this historical period. For example, the Gospel of John (4.27) shows that Jesus' disciples were surprised that he was speaking to a woman, indicating that it would not be common for people of the opposite gender to speak to each other if they were strangers. However, it cannot be denied that within the Gospels, there are fewer women in less prominent roles than men.

The interviewed participants used the bible as a means to compare experiences of gender and, despite being written over two thousand years ago, it is still, for evangelical Christians, a living document upon which they base their lives. This provides further explanation as to why gender differences are not obvious. The gendered roles of those in the New Testament mirror those adopted by the interviewed participants. These roles did not appear to be questioned by those within the church. This acceptance of gendered roles is similar to the study referenced in the literature review conducted by Davidman and Griel who interviewed women and men within Jewish families. They observed that there are differences within the traditional roles of both genders. The differences between the gendered roles of women and men will be further explored later in this chapter via the work of Judith Butler.

Gender relationship

There are key distinctions between gender relationships which will be explored in this section. Culturally, human beings are conditioned to understand relationships between women and men in fixed ways that are linked to the environment they live in. The following are examples which will be given from the interviews with participants which illustrate this.

When interviewed, Participant 6, a man, reflected on the differences between the genders and whether they might be differences in conversion experiences:

“Man and woman are, though it’s not politically correct to say, they are different, and I think that to think of the Lord working through our characters and the character of a woman as opposed to a man is quite legitimate. But I think there are, you might say, overriding factors, that we have souls and it is not man : man, woman : woman, or man : woman; it’s human : God, or man : God, or woman : God.”

Participant 6 is making a point that the most important relationship is the spiritual one that human beings have with God. He talked more of his understanding about differences between genders:

“Certainly, you know, a woman would be naturally more tender, and a man tends to be a bit more, masculine, you know. But when you actually look into it, it doesn’t quite work out like that. We might express it in different ways, but it is actually talking about the same thing.”

Participant 6 is referring to what, at its core is a conversion experience that is the same for women and men, in its spiritual dimension. He continues to talk:

“Although I’m mindful if I’m speaking to a man or a woman, of the differences, but I don’t actually treat them differently when it comes to the actual essentials. Because I think however it manifests, you know, in our personality, because our personalities vary anyway, let alone man : woman, we are all different. But what goes on in the heart, they are identical works.”

Participant 6 has described the way in which both genders are the same in God’s view, however, whilst talking, he expresses that there are differences between genders in his view:

“I think one of the things about different roles of women and men, obviously there can be some misunderstanding of our position, we don’t tend to have women pastors, we have men. But that does not mean that we don’t believe in the equality of the soul, men and women. And actually, that although a woman might be different from a man, they can be crucial in a church.”

“So even though we might be different from some denominations in that, certainly, I’ve always valued the women in our church and very often they can be the strength of the church for various reasons.”

Of the other participants who were interviewed, two of the women are involved with teaching groups, one with a youth group (Participant 1) and another (Participant 4) is responsible for running the Sunday school and the junior school club. Participant 4’s husband is a church deacon. As illustrated within the literature review, Ursula King establishes that when analysing whether women and men have equal status within a church, one should ask how the roles of women and men compare, are the positions of men more favourable?

Participant 6 stressed the way in which women and men’s souls are equal, however, it is clear that the physical bodies and minds of both genders, in his opinion, are not

equal. It is the men who have the power to become the church leaders, the women are given (by men) the lesser roles of managing groups within the church. The data from the interviews concurs with what sociologists of religion describe as gendering. For instance, Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead describe the way in which different religious communities reinforce gender differences by creating discrepancies of power between genders with women often being endowed with characteristics associated with “love, care, chastity, humility and self-sacrifice”, men are often encouraged to behave in a dominant way.³⁰² Harriet Bradley writes that institutions such as churches impose gendered rules on their congregation which affect social relationships “such as the sexual division of labour”.³⁰³ Adrian Thatcher concurs with this view, writing that “Churches, like mosques and synagogues are hugely important institutions in “gendering” the people who attend them as men and women, in mediating to us to beliefs and practices about ourselves in relation to people of the other sex”.³⁰⁴ This was very visible in the interview with Participant 6 who has an awareness of the patriarchy of Christianity and of his church, however, it also illustrates the way in which the power differentials between women and men are either ignored, downplayed or considered as natural.

This difference between the roles of women and men within the church can be seen to be reflected in the relationship of God and human beings. Interestingly it is this relationship between God and humans that transpires more prominently in the accounts from the RERC database. It is apparent when reading the narratives in the RERC database that it is God who is perceived as the one with the power over

³⁰² Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 161.

³⁰³ Harriet Bradley, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 26.

³⁰⁴ Thatcher, p. 18.

human beings. When reading the accounts, this power is apparent; “Desire to give himself wholly to God”,³⁰⁵ “Surrendered to Jesus Christ”,³⁰⁶ “Felt a power surging through him”,³⁰⁷ “God’s presence kept him safe”,³⁰⁸ “Now trusts God to look after his needs”,³⁰⁹ “Committed his life into His [Jesus’] hands”.³¹⁰ A similar understanding came also through in one of the interviews during which the male interviewee referred to his conversion as suddenly he “became aware of a power that was testifying to his heart”. (Participant 6).

The following are examples of entries from the women’s accounts in the RERC database, “God met with her and enveloped her, awe inspiring”,³¹¹ “Felt a power outside of herself”,³¹² “sense of being touched by an almighty and beneficent power”.³¹³ Men, on the other hand, more frequently alluded to the power of God than women. In order to try to understand why this polarisation of views might be so, it is beneficial to reflect upon the way in which human beings conform to their given gendered roles as will be referenced to Judith Butler.³¹⁴ Given the pressure to confirm to gendered roles, it would be natural for men to take a more aggressive stance and refer to “power” when reflecting on their experience of God.

³⁰⁵ RERC 000285.

³⁰⁶ RERC 000328.

³⁰⁷ RERC 000437.

³⁰⁸ RERC 000492.

³⁰⁹ RERC 000693.

³¹⁰ RERC 000693.

³¹¹ RERC 000001.

³¹² RERC 000079.

³¹³ RERC 000640.

³¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 41-42.

Judith Butler

To return to the initial problem of why the interviewed participants did not acknowledge any presence of a gendered difference in their conversion experiences. The work of Judith Butler will be used to explore and justify the reasons for the apparent invisibility of these differences. Butler's work gives an indication as to why participants felt that their experiences were not gendered. Butler acknowledges that gender is a culturally constructed concept and provides a philosophical basis for this tenet. She explores whether gender is something which we can choose to have some control over, "a form of choice".³¹⁵ Butler argues that traditionally, the position of women has been separated from "class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations", so it has been assumed and argued by feminists that women are intrinsically different to men.³¹⁶ She asks whether then, one can take on the qualities of what is assumed to be masculine or feminine and is gender a choice?³¹⁷ Butler contends that sex is not the traditionally assumed given or fixed binary feature that it is accepted to be, she argues that sex is constructed in the same way that gender is. Furthermore, Butler writes that there are limits to the way in which the constructed nature of gender is perceived, this is because "these limits are always set within the terms of hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality".³¹⁸

This means that it is difficult to perceive of the cultural constraints and limitations that are placed on women and men given that one lives within a cultural structure which is designed to perceive one as being either 'female' or 'male'. This is especially so as

³¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 12.

³¹⁶ Butler, p. 7.

³¹⁷ Butler, p. 12.

³¹⁸ Butler, p.13.

the language that is used to describe gender differences is discerned as being comprehensively logical and impartial. This point is particularly important with regard to the conversion experiences of the interviewed participants who base their frame of reference on the composition of aspects of the New Testament which focuses on a requirement to acknowledge that one is a sinner. The need to acknowledge sin is of such great importance that any difference in the way it is conducted is lost or ignored.

Butler writes that it is not possible to 'be' one gender or another, but in fact it is a 'performative' function, "gender is always a doing".³¹⁹ She does not mean that one has agency within 'doing', Butler is clear that one 'performs' without free will or insight into the gendered role one has adopted.³²⁰ One does not live in the world alone and Butler is clear that one is 'doing' with others, within cultural norms and expectations. Butler argues that the concept of 'I' is a social construct, 'I' only exists within the poststructuralist theory that 'I' is a signification of language. If this is the case, then neither 'I', 'gender' nor 'sex' can exist outside of language or cultural construction. Moreover, gender identity cannot precede language, this is Butler's rationale for 'doing' gender rather than 'being' a gender. Butler's theory demonstrates why the interviewed participants felt that their experiences were non gendered, in that the participants are not aware of their differences as their cultural norms are not only rooted in the present but also link to the two thousand year old New Testament. Notably, the conversion experiences of those interviewed are interpreted directly through the New Testament; because of this, gender differences were not discernibly obvious to those who were interviewed. None of the individuals

³¹⁹ Butler, p. 33.

³²⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

who contributed to the RERC database made any reference to gender differences within their experiences; though it must be acknowledged that this is something which Alister Hardy did not solicit. Gendered roles are so rooted in our culture that differences are not always easy to perceive as they cannot be detached from everyday life experiences.

Conclusion

The interviewed participants and examples from the RERC database described their experience of conversion using language that had clear gendered differences in the way that the relationship with God is conceived. This difference is subtle and not necessarily apparent to those who are church members. Women make use of different metaphors to describe their conversion experience. They generally use language which is more paternalistic, describing God in terms of a father-like figure and experiencing their emotions in a physical manner. With regard to sexual morality, women feel the need to unburden themselves of a sense of guilt for having sinned whilst men have identified that they should abstain from immoral practices. Both women and men find it difficult to recognise any gender differences within their conversion experience, this is because they see and describe it from a biblical perspective. Judith Butler argues that language and culture cannot be separated from gender and one has to “perform” one’s gender. It is therefore impossible to step outside of a gendered experience. Participant 6, for example, argues that while women hold an important position within the New Testament, he also states that women do not hold the position of pastor within his church. Women are important, but not equal to men. Therefore, their experience of conversion must be different to that of men as they maintain different cultural positions from men.

Final Conclusion

The aim of this research dissertation was to compare the conversion experiences of women to men and identify differences that occur and to determine the impact that this might have. Qualitative research was carried out using a mixture of fieldwork and analysis of information that has already been catalogued in the Religious Experience Research Centre database housed in Lampeter. My objective was to interview to women and men who had experienced Christian conversion, identify how such differences are manifested and hypothesise as to why such differences exist. The conclusion will revisit and summarise the findings of the research as identified within the main body of the dissertation. Conclusions will be presented regarding the aim of the study. Recommendations for future research will be included. There will be a short paragraph on the limitations of the research and a section of self-reflection.

Summary of findings and conclusions

The general aim of the dissertation was to explore whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men within Christianity.

The literature review provided a definition of religious experience and conversion. Six people were interviewed, four women, two men. They were asked to reflect on their background, this included whether they had Christian influences early in their life; what events led up to their conversion experience; provide a description of their conversion experience, to include the length of time it took; what difference did it make to their life; how would they describe their experience of God? A sample of accounts (sixteen women and nineteen men) from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience (RERC) database house in Lampeter were examined, the same questions were applied. Models and influential work conducted and established by Henri Gooren, William James and Lewis Rambo were used as a foundation for which

A number of headings were derived from research conducted by William James,³²¹ Henri Gooren,³²² and Lewis Rambo.³²³ They were used as the basis of a model from which varied aspects of conversion could be examined. Consequently, common themes were identified from the data, these were explored in detail.

³²¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

³²² Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³²³ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

Speed of conversion

Of the six people who were interviewed, two of the women describe a rapid conversion, one of the men. Within the RERC database, seven of the women experienced a rapid conversion, one describes a slow conversion, eight did not comment on this aspect. With regard to the men, eleven relate a rapid conversion, two identify that it occurred slowly, six did not reflect on this aspect of their conversion. From the evidence, there appears to be no difference regarding gender within this facet of conversion.

Social factors

These are factors which might influence conversion from a social perspective, that is the influence of friends or family members on people. The majority of the interviewed participants, both men and women, had friends or family members who were Christians. Ten of the women and twelve of the men from the RERC database had social influences within their lives prior to their conversion. This indicates that the majority of people had a Christian influence in their lives prior to their conversion. There was no indication of any gender based differences.

Institutional factors

Institutional factors are those which come from a church or from influential figures within a church community. The church played a factor in the vast majority of people's conversions, it was identified that all those who were interviewed included

varying degrees of institutional factors which were influential within their conversion to Christianity. There was no indication of any gender based differences.

Individual factors

These factors include personal influences that contributed to conversion. There are clear instances illustrating both women and men who have had individual factors which drove them towards conversion, again this is no obvious distinction between gendered experiences.

Contingency factors

Contingency factors are important aspects of an individual's life which were conditional to the individual converting to Christianity. There were examples from both interviewed participants and those within the database which could be used to illustrate these factors. For example, depression, alcoholism or other crises. There is no appreciable difference between the numbers or experiences of women and men who have identifiable contingency factors to their conversion.

Consequences to conversion

There is evidence that the impact of conversion had a long lasting effect on the lives of all those interviewed. Following their conversion, they have all remained Christian. The evidence from the database suggests that consequences for all contributors were very positive. Again, there was no discernible difference between genders.

Theological factors

All but one of the interviewed participants were members of evangelical churches. Therefore, their interpretation of Christian conversion was linked to the New Testament. Their understanding is that Jesus died for the sins of humanity, so that all people might be forgiven for their sins. Once this is acknowledged along with a firm belief in Jesus Christ as a saviour, people are able to repent and be 'born again'. This explanation of conversion does not appear to allow for gender differences.

Gendered Experience

The second aim of the dissertation was to establish why it is important to understand that there is a difference between the gendered experiences of women and men, to identify why this occurs; and to determine the impact that it has on women's lives within Christianity. As suggested by the evidence above, unexpectedly it appeared that gendered experiences, at least superficially, appeared to be very similar with little to distinguish with regard to the anticipated differences. The original hypothesis was that as gender plays a role in all aspects of our lives, there would be clear differences displayed in women and men's conversion experiences. Further analysis was conducted to establish the reasons for this apparent incongruity. Additional headings were applied to the research, this was a useful means of identifying clear outcomes against which the data could be analysed. Data was examined in

relationship to existing research based on work conducted by Jennifer Coates,³²⁴ Colleen Conway,³²⁵ and Judith Butler.³²⁶

Language

There was evidence to show that women and men use different language to describe their conversion experiences. Jennifer Coates, as illustrated in the literature review, described language always being gendered, never neutral. Gendered differences are embedded in our cultural and physical lives, so much so, that they are not always obvious or discernible. The evidence shows that there are some differences between the way in which women describe the need to be cleansed of their sin whilst men focused more on a requirement to abstain from sin. There was also evidence that the way in which women and men use language to describe their experience of God is different. There is a gendered element of giving oneself to God in a more passive way as a woman. Women and men refer to a belief or knowledge that God loves them; they describe Him as being more powerful than human beings. However, seen as a whole, the narratives of men tend to be less emotional. Women describe their experience in a more physical way, relating the way in which God or Jesus has touched them. For women, the evidence suggests their attachment to and dependence on God in a hetero-normative way, as a paternal or husband like figure. The men did not use similar metaphors. God helped women feel complete and enable men to feel fulfilled. There is some evidence that men use different words to

³²⁴ Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language* (Oxen: Routledge, 2013).

³²⁵ Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language* (Oxen: Routledge, 2013).

³²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

women, such as “crushing” and “surging”, while women use words such as “certainty” and “security”.

Sexual morality and ethics

Many of the interviewed participants raised the issue of sexual ethics and morality during the interviews. This was not a question which had been originally considered within the research. However, the interviews have shown how important it is within the conversion experience. Similar views were expressed by both women and men with regard to sexual morality. Women and men stated that they live their life according to biblical principles, specifically those identified within the New Testament.

Gendered roles and the New Testament

Many of those people who were interviewed asked me about what evidence I had found to support my hypothesis. One interviewed participant pointed out that there is no difference between men and women to God. However, as demonstrated by Colleen Conway, men were considered to be higher in rank than women during the historical period when Jesus was alive. The interviewed participants used the bible as a means to compare experiences of gender and, despite being written over two thousand years ago, it is still, for Evangelical Christians, a living document upon which they base their lives. This provides further explanation as to why gender differences are not obvious. The gendered roles of those in the New Testament mirror those adopted by the interviewed participants.

Gender relationship

This section demonstrates that spiritually, the conversion experience is the same for women as for men. However, as explained by Judith Butler, culturally, human beings are conditioned to understand relationships between women and men in fixed ways that are linked to the environment they live in. The differences in the roles of women and men were not recognised by those interviewed. The men took on the traditional roles of Pastor or Priest whilst the women were responsible for running the Sunday school or youth groups. The evidence demonstrates that the power differentials between women and men are either ignored, downplayed or considered as natural.

Recommendations and Limitations

The key limitation is that the research was conducted as part of a Master of Research, this limits the extent of the research as only a small number of individuals were interviewed. However, the study has the potential to be extended into a PhD. There is sufficient scope to enlarge the field of study to encompass other Christian denominations or churches and conduct a more detailed qualitative study of gendered conversion experiences. There has been little research conducted in this area, therefore, there is the potential to improve knowledge and understanding. The sample of research was small, whilst this does not invalidate it, it does mean that it cannot be applied broadly.

The second limitation involves the research itself; there were difficulties in identifying people who would agree to be interviewed and, as shown in the methodology section, this resulted in a narrow range of people contributing. This means that the research can only be interpreted within a narrow perspective of evangelical Christianity. Should further research be conducted, it would be possible to draw stronger conclusions.

To summarise, the study demonstrates that conversion as defined by those within Evangelical churches is interpreted directly through the gospel tradition. Therefore, when examined superficially, there is little to suggest a difference in gendered experience of conversion. However, when explored in detail it has been clearly proven that contrasts exist within the use of language and gendered roles. The

difference between women and men is embedded so deeply within our culture that it is not obvious and can be difficult to recognise.

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Appendix

Transcript of a section of the interview held with Participant 2.

Interviewer: "So you were brought up in a Christian environment?"

Participant: "Probably Christian of all Christian environments that could be because my father is pastor and my grandfather was also pastor, he has died now. So yes, in that respect on both sides of my family, both had Christian backgrounds".

Interviewer: "Does that mean that you have always had a strong religious conviction?"

Participant: "Yes, it depends, in terms of conviction, if you mean, I never doubted that there was a God, I believed in creation. So, I had a conviction, I probably with school friends I would, to some extent, defend Christianity; but in terms of a personal relationship, I didn't have that during my childhood, even though I knew it was to be sought and to be found. But I didn't have that personal connection."

Interviewer: "So, in your childhood, you went to church regularly? Did you ask questions about God or religion?"

Participant: "I did, I think certainly I went from an early age. There are many things I've probably forgotten but many people who I've known through my life reminded me of certain things I used to say when I went to Sunday school. I think I struggled with the idea that God was not created, and I used to say, 'Who created God, who created God?'. I had those questions but it doesn't mean that I doubted God but I was trying to work things out. I think during my teenager years I became more self conscious and I because I realised that it wasn't necessarily cool to have, well I felt it was considered not cool to have a father who was a pastor. I was very shy, and I had other personal struggles. We had moved away from the city to the country and back to the city again after five years because my dad started a church in the country. I think being in school and making new friends, I was kind of very quiet about it, in my teenage years."

Interviewer: "Tell me a little about how this changed?"

Participant: "The turning point was when I went to university, when I left home. I always knew that I followed Christianity in an outwards sense but what I was taught in church and what I understood from the bible was that I had to have a personal experience. And I was seeking that all through those years in many ways, but I never really found it. And because I knew I was in this very Christian background, I was asking but didn't have experience in how that would happen and would I know, that sort of thing."

Interviewer: "Sounds like a lot of pressure".

Participant: "I think I felt that there were expectations because I was the pastor's daughter and I was eighteen years old and I was not a Christian in the sense of, you know, had been converted. But at the same time while other people, other friends or

other people, at the church where I was until I was 18. It was my grandfather's church, so it was quite a big church. Many young people claimed to be Christians very easily and I knew I couldn't do it, I couldn't pretend, even though sometimes I felt tempted, I couldn't say 'Oh yes I've had this experience' but I didn't. So, when I went to university, and yes, I suppose that I still had a very strong like I wanted to go to church when I went to university. But a lot of it was, I think, connected to respecting my parents as well. So, if I had, even now, to know what my motivations were, like a mixture of both. And they knew I was going to this good church in London. But I think I was very struck by that church because it was very different and lots of young people, the way they behaved made me realise, wow, they are actually very different. They were very active, it's hard to describe it, yeah, in the service, in what they were doing, in yeah, their witnessing to the people. So, I think the experience of being away from home and realising actually I am on my own, I don't have to do these things because necessarily, you know, because my parents did it. And I suppose I did ask those questions, you know, even then I knew that Christianity, that I needed Jesus Christ basically. Even though I was attracted by other things which were contrary to what some would believe Christians should do. So, I don't know if this is following what you want?"

Interviewer: "Please, go on, talk away. Really whatever your personal experience is. Take your time please."

Participant: "Yeah, ok. I think, I realise more and more now, I had a very protective, lovely, nice upbringing. And living with new people in your first year in halls of residence really opens your eyes to the way other people live their lives. I think I was just struck by many things, that, ooo, you know, I don't really like that. Um, things which were very, you know, well, what people take as normal, whether it was just drunken behaviour or drugs, all this kind of thing. It wasn't really till my second year of university; I was still struggling with, what is being converted, I know I had to acknowledge that I was a sinner, not just acknowledge, but know it. I think I struggled with that because I was always kind of a good person. Yeah, but then it was, it's a strange thing, slowly, I felt God was working in my heart, maybe I didn't see it exactly for a long time. But there was something, I studied French and German and was accused of plagiarism. It was a complicated situation where a few of us were. I know I felt really like a criminal. I think it was a way of me realising, you know, I am able to do things, you know, deceitfulness. If you are put in the right situation, there are things in your heart which you don't know. I think God was showing me those things, to show me other things about myself. I just remember, well, one afternoon I was studying for my exams.

Yeah, and many ways it felt like out of the blue, it wasn't like this big thing, I just kind of like paused and I asked God, please just forgive me. Please come into my life. And I just somehow felt like something I had never ever felt before. Just well, basically, the experience of forgiveness. And I did actually write down my thoughts a day later, my dad encouraged me to, just so I could remember, though I don't know where it is now. I think relief was one of the main feelings I had, just because it was like, this burden, this thing I wanted but didn't know. If I would ever experience this or would ever find this peace. It was a mixture of relief and peace, I mean I suppose it's a classic thing to say but I felt like really light, I felt like a bird, you know. I really felt like Jesus Christ almost like embracing you all the way round, I experienced that it

was that moment, I think I even remembered the time, it was about ten past five. And then I had to do my exam the next day but having done half of my exams and doing the rest and having the experience in the middle, just kind of. Yeah, afterwards I felt like I was looking down on myself, you know, I could see the perspective of everything in front of me. Umm, and it was very unique, I haven't had anything like that since. And I'm so grateful, looking back, that God had allowed me to have an experience, I've never doubted my faith since then. Even though I despair with myself sometimes, why do I do this. I know it's very different for other people, from people I've spoken to about whether they have any doubts. You know they struggle with assurance, am I really experiencing this. But I never had that for whatever reason, and I'm grateful for it. Yeah, so that's it basically."

Interviewer: "So since then, has anything changed in your faith or has it deepened further?"

Participant: "Well, it's a strange one, because even though I suppose I brought up in all these things I almost feel like the journey only began at that point. So, in terms of main faith deepening or, it almost felt like that was day one, so, so it really felt, because it was a whole different thing, like it was, you realised before then you were in darkness and now you were in light. That you have this relationship that you didn't have. It's strange, like you know, I prayed before to like, it's almost like, this person that you never knew. I don't know how to say it, like having somebody that you write to over the internet. But the difference is when you actually get to embrace somebody in real life. You know, I don't know whether that is a good comparison, but it was a real thing. So, it has definitely deepened and I also feel that life has been much more difficult since then. But also, much more meaningful."

Interviewer: "When you say difficult, in what sense, in that God is now a part of everything and that therefore everything has to come together?"

Participant: "Yes, I think difficult because somehow when I became a Christian, I realised that it's almost like your spiritual senses are on and therefore, you're also, it almost feels that you're vulnerable because you realise there are powers of darkness as well. And God in his bible, he promises Christians do not have an easy life. You read about it but practising it, well, daily life, there's lots of things which affect you in your heart in different ways; whether you feel a burden for people that you didn't used to or that there are just, I'm trying to think. Different scenarios, you know, in life, um, you know, I mean, I suppose, now that I'm back in Cardiff being the pastor's daughter, I mean, I became very close to my father in his work and realised he has a lot of challenges with difficult people and I think I was very much part of that. I don't know if that really answers the question but, yeah, not difficult in terms of now I have to make sure, I think it was more difficult because I almost felt I'm kind of I'm not a Christian although I feel like I should be. It was much easier to make a stand, though at the beginning I was still a bit shy in telling some people. As I've got older and, you know, it's something I don't necessarily hide but I've learnt how to be wise in a situation. You know, what you say and how you say it."

Interviewer: "I just want to ask about your current social or cultural influences, do you have a lot of friends who would consider themselves Christian as well?"

Participant: "Yes, well mainly from church circles where, I also made some good friends from church in London and in Cardiff. Yeah, I think in that respect there's friends of all ages. I used to have, obviously, my colleagues, so, a mixture of both, but those who I share the closest connection are those who are Christians, yes."

Background information on people interviewed

Participant 1	A self employed women in her early 30s living in the Gloucestershire area. She is a member of an Evangelical church taking a role in leading youth groups. She was raised in Zimbabwe and has lived in the UK for sixteen years; her parents were Greek Orthodox.
Participant 2	A woman in her 20s living in south Wales, attends an independent evangelical reformed church. Daughter of a pastor.
Participant 3	A man, retired Anglican vicar living in mid Wales. Attended an evangelical church as a young man in the north of England.
Participant 4	A woman in her 50s living in south Wales, attends an independent evangelical reformed church. She was raised in London, her parents were Catholic. Her husband is the church secretary, she runs the Sunday school and junior school club.
Participant 5	A women, retired from teaching, living in south Wales, attends an independent evangelical reformed church. Her husband is the pastor.
Participant 6	A man in his 60s, pastor of an independent evangelical reformed church based in south Wales. His father was responsible for forming the church.

Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre database

The database accounts included the following entries:

Women: 000001, 000079, 000102, 000141, 000225, 000250, 000292, 000318, 000360, 000361, 000366, 000381, 000556, 000640, 000644, 000698.

Men: 005113, 000126, 000221, 000256, 000258, 000296, 000328, 000340, 000345, 000397, 000437, 000492, 000510, 000527, 000574, 000623, 000653, 000690, 000693.