

The Ties That Bind:

**Women's Public Vision
for Politics, Religion,
and Civil Society**



Amy Caiazza
Institute for Women's Policy Research

About This Report

This report is the first in a series on women's work as leaders and activists in religious, and particularly interfaith, social justice organizations. The series will analyze the values, motivations, experiences, and leadership development of women involved in this work. It will also explore how leaders in the women's movement think about religion and religious values.

IWPR hopes that our research will build awareness of the work and values of women who work as volunteers and activists in support of social justice, often based on their faith. In doing so, we hope to contribute to building a new, more unified source of support for social justice issues and causes, and to ensuring that women's voices are central to politics and U.S. policymaking.

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About the Institute for Women's Policy Research

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) is a scientific research organization dedicated to informing and stimulating the debate on public policy issues of critical importance to women and their families. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family, health and safety, and women's civic and political participation.

The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and families and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR, an independent, nonprofit, research organization also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women's studies at The George Washington University.

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Preface

With *The Ties That Bind: Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society*, the Institute for Women's Policy Research offers a new way of thinking about issues of politics and morality in the United States, based on how these ideas are defined and described for us in a series of interviews with women religious social justice activists. By publishing this report, IWPR hopes to reframe the language of religion, morality, and politics in a way that is informed by women's experiences, authority, and agency.

The Ties That Bind is the first major publication from a project IWPR began in the fall of 2003 to think about the opportunities for and obstacles to women's activism and leadership in religious institutions, particularly as a conduit for civic and political participation. The project was inspired, in part, by our ongoing concern over women's low levels of political and civic involvement, in turn rooted in our interest in improving women's status and raising the visibility of issues of concern to women. In essence, we would like to see more women involved in politics and civic life, both to increase fairness and to promote the issues that women care about. IWPR is dedicated to research that broadens public dialogue and addresses strategies that can improve women's participation and representation.

The women we interviewed provide compelling models for us all in their inspiring and effective activism and leadership. They also show what happens when women claim activist roles: they inject new ideas and visions based on their distinct experiences and values. As men do, women work from the history and values of their religious, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds, but they bring their own perspectives to them as well—at times in ways that challenge male privilege and transform concepts defined, traditionally, by men.

One of the important implications of our findings is that there is substantial room for collaboration and coordination between women like those we interviewed and the women in the U.S. women's movement. Religious social justice groups share important goals and values with the women's movement, and as a result there is great potential benefit in pursuing collaborative work. Yet the two movements rarely work closely together on issues that are of concern to both communities—in part because of skepticism on both sides about motivations and values.

IWPR plans over the next several years to work toward building closer relationships among leaders—particularly women leaders—of women's organizations and religious social justice groups. To this end, we are launching a Working Group on Women's Public Vision, which will be made up of leaders in both communities, as well as academics and religious leaders working in related fields, who will work to develop stronger networks and cooperative activities. We hope that this group will

raise the visibility of the values and visions of women doing social justice work in a variety of contexts. We hope it will bring women's voices more visibly and forcefully into debates over moral values and politics.

This report, and the work that will follow it, are designed to inspire a new set of conversations about how best to integrate women's concerns, ideas, and visions into policymaking, political and religious institutions, and activist movements at all levels of American society. The women we interviewed are inspiring and heartening in the energy, thoughtfulness, and passion they bring to their work. By really hearing what they have to say, all of us, as individuals, as communities, and as a nation, can benefit.

Heidi Hartmann, Ph.D.
President
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Acknowledgments

This project relied first and foremost on the participation of the women and men interviewed for our research. In every case, they volunteered their time, energy, and passion. They approached the interviews with honesty and sincerity, which made meeting and speaking with them a truly moving and inspiring set of experiences. We would like to thank each and every participant for their involvement.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Ties That Bind: Introduction to the Public Vision of Religious Women Activists.....	1
Women, Politics, and Religion.....	2
Women’s Public Vision.....	7
Women and the Moral Values Debate.....	11
Chapter 2: “The Work of God is Work in the World”: Faith as a Call to Action.....	13
A Calling from God.....	15
I Began To Do Miraculous Things: Activism Inspired by Epiphany (<i>Focus Box</i>).....	16
Faith in Action.....	21
Tying Faith to Community.....	27
Chapter 3: “The Salt and Light”: Images of God and Women’s Religious Activism Around Cultural Issues and Social Justice.....	31
“The Chair You Sit in Has No Morality”: Conservative Women Defend Moral Standards.....	33
“In Community You Experience God”: Religious Women Work for Social Welfare.....	39
The Goal of Working in Community: Engaging a Cooperative and Nurturing God in Relationships with Others.....	39
Strategies for Engaging Others in Community: Helping the Neediest and Working for Justice.....	45
The Weight of History: Faith, Justice, and the Activism of African American, Jewish, and Muslim Women.....	48
Conclusion.....	52
Chapter 4: “God Is in the Space Between Us”: The Values of Religious Women Activists Working for Social Justice.....	55
Leaving the World a Better Place.....	57
Love, Peace, and Compassion.....	60
Interconnectedness.....	64
The Basic Worth and Dignity of God’s Children.....	68
Conclusion: Women’s Values, Public Vision, and Moral Agency.....	74
Chapter 5: A Long Time Coming: Limitations on Women’s Public Voice.....	77
Hesitation and Resistance.....	77
Encouraging Women’s Public Voice.....	84
Chapter 6: Transforming Politics as We Know Them: Implications for Politics, Religion, and Feminism.....	95
Women’s Public Values and Vision: Summary.....	96
Redefining Progressive Politics.....	97
Transforming Religion.....	101
Revitalizing Women’s Organizing.....	105
Appendix: Research Design and Methodology for the Interviews.....	111
References.....	119

The Ties That Bind: Introduction to the Public Vision of Religious Women Activists

“It’s the struggle for the quality of life, no matter where it is.... It goes back to that Creation, trying to get some sense of that goodness back into our lives, no matter whether it’s economic or global or what. And I think the social justice part creates a co-responsibility with other women to be able to do that.”

The beginning of the 21st century has been typified by many social and political observers as a time of division in the United States. It is also a time of charged debate over “moral values”: what they are, who defines them, and how they should be applied or lived out in politics and society. Social and cultural issues such as reproductive rights and gay marriage have not only become more prominent, but they have increasingly polarized American political opinions (Kaufmann 2002; Layman 1997). Given the tremendous social, economic, and technological changes that have characterized the past century, it is perhaps not surprising that the country has reached this point.

It is discouraging, though, how infrequently women’s voices have been an influential part of recent debates among political leaders over what roles “moral values” should play in politics and society, especially because so many of those values and debates directly involve women’s lives. “Moral values” arguments have traditionally been used to limit women’s involvement as fully respected participants and leaders in political, social, and economic life, and their voices should be included in “values” debates if we are to achieve a fully inclusive and responsive democracy.

Listening to women’s voices might also bring fresh perspectives and insights into the values debates. Women living, working, and building communities at the grassroots of American society may have a different voice about what “moral values” mean and what they demand of American citizens. Their ideas may change the way we debate politics and policymaking about a variety of issues.

This report seeks to understand and amplify the moral values and vision of women, particularly those working for civic and political change in their communities. Because so many “moral values” issues are linked to religious faiths and traditions, we focus in particular on the values and visions of women working as activists in religious contexts. In a series of in-depth interviews with women activists across the country, we sought to determine what kinds of values and themes are central to their work and leadership.

What we found is that religious women activists provide a model for transforming how we look at many of the issues and problems facing the United States, as well as a new form of leadership for addressing them. This report analyzes the common themes

that religious women activists evoke in their work, particularly around social justice, in the hope of incorporating their voices into debates over policy and moral values. It also analyzes the ways that women in these settings are claiming moral and religious authority, despite traditional limitations on their leadership among most religious traditions and the American political system. Finally, it discusses the implications

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of women's moral values and authority for American politics, religious institutions, and women's movements. It argues that the values and visions of women like many of those we interviewed—

committed to justice, driven by ideas about moral values, and inspired to define those values on their own—can transform and revitalize all three institutions, by providing a new way of thinking about political rights and responsibilities and building a source of new energy and ideas.

WOMEN, POLITICS, AND RELIGION

This report is part of a larger project on women's activism in religious and particularly interfaith settings. It is based on a set of 75 in-depth, free-flowing interviews with women (and a few men) involved in community activism around a variety of political, social, or civic causes. Most of the women interviewed work with interfaith community groups—religiously based organizations that bring together individuals from a variety of congregations and religious denominations to work on a particular cause or set of issues. A few come from groups that are rooted in a particular denomination (for example, Catholic Charities). Most would call themselves

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progressive or moderate; a few work on behalf of conservative causes. Some direct or work in national organizations, but most are involved at the grassroots

level, working with local groups on issues ranging from hunger and homelessness to environmental justice, to reproductive rights, to gay marriage. Almost all claimed to be involved in some kind of political activism as well as civic or service-based work (for more on the methodology, see Appendix). Importantly, about a third of the women interviewed serve as leaders or even founders of religious social justice groups—again, mostly those that are interfaith. In fact, the visibility of women leaders in interfaith social justice work was partly why we chose to focus on these groups: they provide an interesting example of a setting in which women are claiming political and religious leadership, if slowly (for information on women's leadership in religious community organizing, see Appendix).

The intense civic and political involvement of the women interviewed differentiates them from most men and women in the United States, religious or not. In the United States, levels of participation are generally low. Although most Americans—more than three-quarters—are members of or contributors to at least one civic or political organization, many are affiliated only by paying membership fees. Only about half claim to have attended at least one organizational meeting in the past year. Levels of political participation—that directed at influencing electoral politics or the design or implementation of policy—are particularly low. Only about 16 percent of all women and 19 percent of all men participate in informal political activities directed at solving community problems, and less than half of all women (44 percent) and slightly more than half of men (53 percent) are even affiliated with an organization that takes political stances. Only about a third (30 percent of women and 38 percent of men) contact their elected officials to express their opinions about issues or policies (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Not only are levels of participation low, then, but women have lower levels than men.

Religion plays an interesting role in both encouraging civic engagement among Americans and contributing to gender differences in participation. Religion is an important historical and contemporary factor in mobilizing the activism of all Americans. Many of our largest religious institutions push political causes and advocate for social change. Men and women learn and practice important civic skills in their congregations that can be translated into broader civic and political life. They develop networks there that can end up pulling people into civic activism through recruitment. So, while someone may start going to church simply to worship, the people she meets there may eventually recruit her to volunteer for the local soup kitchen. Once there, she may then be asked to turn out for a march for more services for the homeless in the community. Clergy or other congregation members may personally ask her to contact her representative about housing issues (e.g., Ayala 2000; Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Campbell 2004; Djupe and Grant 2001; Jones-Correa 2001; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wuthnow and Evans 2002). According to some research, the recruitment networks developed in congregations are even stronger than those developed at work (Ayala 2000). Overall, religious membership is considered one of the stronger factors associated with increased civic and political participation.

Interestingly, women are more involved in congregational life than men, as 74 percent of women and 58 percent of men identify with congregations, and 29 percent of women versus 21 percent of men attend services frequently and participate in other congregational activities (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). In theory, then, congregations have the potential to involve women in activism around issues they care about—they could be a place to amplify women's voices. But in fact, the opposite

Despite women's religious involvement, congregations do not provide them equal opportunities to participate in community life, and congregations are less likely to translate that involvement into political activism.

is happening: within congregations, men are more likely to attend or plan meetings, make speeches, or serve on boards, where many are recruited into other civic and political activities (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Despite women's religious involvement, congregations do not provide them equal opportunities to participate in community life, and congregations are less likely to translate that involvement into political activism.

So why aren't women as politicized by church experiences as men are? Some of the problem may be connected to limitations on women's religious voice and leadership. At a basic level, men's dominance of religious leadership in almost all religions could be sending the message that only men can rightfully claim religious authority. At a deeper level, most religious denominations come from a history of patriarchal values and traditions, which have been used to limit women's roles as leaders and activists. Religion scholars point to a problem with the very idea of women's religious authority or moral agency: most religions simply have not granted women either, based on assumptions and proscriptions about women's roles and rationality. Religions—particularly the major U.S., monotheistic religions of Christianity and Judaism, but also Islam—have assigned women a very specific set of roles rooted in family, children, and private life, while excluding them from public forms of leadership, and have presented these roles as based on inherent and fundamental moral values. This system of religious morality has often explicitly provided moral justification for the gender inequality (as well as racial and socioeconomic inequalities) still evident in modern America. For this reason, religion and religious institutions have been criticized by many feminists, including women's movement leaders, religion scholars, and feminist theologians (Buchanan 1996; Chopp and Davaney 1997; Pateman 1988; Schneider and Schneider 1997).

Even outside the dominant American traditions, religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism have their own histories of discounting women's religious agency. The main denominations of Buddhism, for example, have sustained a debate over whether women can achieve enlightenment or must first be reborn as men. At times women's ability to become clergy or follow dharma (religious practice) has been questioned as potentially disrupting their roles in families, or even being disrupted by family roles, issues not raised for men. Some feminists argue that Buddhism on the whole has been more accepting of demands for gender equality in recent centuries than Christianity, and that Buddhism lacks certain symbols and values (such as a masculine image of God) that would make it as resistant to women's religious leadership and agency. Still, women experience limitations on their public leadership and moral agency based on the history and practice of Buddhist religious values and traditions (e.g., Gross 1993; Paul 1985). Hinduism provides yet another model of gender and religious tradition. Its multiple gods and goddesses, and the importance of the female energy of the universe, can be seen as an acknowledgement of women's potential religious power and authority. Still, Hindu theology and practice have placed women's bodies, property, and agency under the control of men, precisely to contain the power and danger that women are said to pose in many Hindu traditions. For this

reason, too, women were traditionally denied religious leadership at the highest levels (Dhruvarajan 1988; Pui-lan 2005; Wadley 1977).

The histories of Buddhism and Hinduism most certainly shape the experiences of women from those traditions in the United States, and so they are important, for the purposes of this research, for understanding the values and activism of their adherents. Still, they have been less influential in shaping U.S. politics and society overall—these spheres of life have more visibly been shaped by Judeo-Christian

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moral codes, including their values concerning gender. In fact, the idea of women's roles as natural and justified by "core" moral values is also closely linked to how we understand American democracy, which, too, is built on the idea of women sustaining home, family, and the private sphere, while men are public figures in politics and economics (Okin 1992; Pateman 1988). This was the justification for denying women suffrage, and although of course women can now vote, women are much less well represented in politics than men—and when they are, they often face questions about whether they can properly balance those roles with family, or even whether as women they have the right stuff for politics, questions men rarely face (Kahn 1992; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991; Niven and Zilber 2001). Such resistance is also evident in debates over whether women, and particularly mothers, should be in the labor force, and who should be responsible for child care when they are.

On a broader scale, the focus of public life is based on values that reflect the norms of the market and the needs of those who hold the most power—white men. Specifically, the language of public life is very much focused on individual rights. As many philosophers have argued, the basic economic and political rights that citizens enjoy in Western capitalist democracies are justified by the concept of an abstract individual, a person with natural rights regardless of sex, race, nationality, or other qualities rooted in the bodily human experience. But this idea often masks a crucial point: that those "in" on the original social contracts founding Western societies—affluent white men—based their concepts of political and economic rights on their own experiences and desires. They created these concepts to serve their own interests, and they excluded those of other groups quite deliberately and explicitly. Slavery, for example, was justified because a certain kind of person was deemed morally inferior—even unhuman—and thus unfit to enter into an equal civic or economic contract with others. Therefore African Americans could be owned and were not granted access to political rights. White women were not enslaved, but they were denied equal political and economic rights, including a respected role in the public sphere, because they supposedly lacked key values such as rationality and the ability to defend their nations physically.

In many ways, both society and religion have changed. More women than not are now in the workforce, and women can both vote and serve in public office. More

women are serving as clergy, religions have adopted changes in their services and language, and women are pushing for theological change. There is also evidence that religion, religious organizations, and religious institutions can encourage activism among women, particular poor women and women of color (e.g., Dodson 2002; Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999; Ozorak 1996; Pardo 1998; Warren 2001).

Still, women's public roles are contested in religion, politics, and society. At the very least, our society and democracy have not fully adapted to the challenges that women's changing roles pose. Women are a small proportion of elected leadership and participate in politics at lower levels than men. We still do not pay women, and especially women of color, wages that equal white men's. We leave individual families (and usually women) to struggle with finding and paying for child care and health care, costs that are a major burden for each family but essential to their well-being. In religion, women's leadership is still barred in many denominations, and where it is not, women clergy often describe significant resistance—a sign that women's

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religious agency is still not completely recognized (Cohen and Schor 2004; Maybury and Chickering 2001; Sullins 2000; Konieczny and Chaves 2000; Schneider and Schneider 1997).

There is also ample evidence that we do not, as a society, yet grant women full moral agency or authority. We are barely aware that there are religious justifications for protecting women's reproductive choices—even though some denominations officially support them—that call us to trust the inherent dignity of women in making choices about their lives and bodies; that trust is too difficult to give to women. Similarly, we blame working mothers for crime, truancy, and poor test scores among children, rather than accepting that women may want or need to work, and coming together as a community to trust that decision and provide the supports it may require.

In this context, the question is not, “Why aren't religious women more politically active?” but “Why would we expect them to be?” Certainly, religious institutions are unlikely to encourage or recruit women into public roles to the extent they do men. And more importantly, why would women themselves trust their moral agency and authority? Why would they trust their own public visions, their ability to take religious or political leadership?

As we spoke with women in our interviews, many described a sense of discomfort in taking on a voice of religious or political leadership, despite the passion and devotion they felt to their values. Others who were more comfortable doing so were still hesitant to talk in any detail about those values—they seemed uncomfortable articulating their own religious authority. This theme is taken up later in the report, in chapter 5, as a way to understand the obstacles to women expressing their public visions—and ways to overcome them.

At the same time, the women we spoke to were chosen in part because they are more comfortable with their individual sense of moral agency than most. They were interviewed because they have chosen to take on a public voice on behalf of causes they see as engaging their religious values. Many are now leaders, and sometimes founders, of organizations, particularly within interfaith settings. These women are models for how women can and should claim a voice in politics and religion in order to promote their public visions.

WOMEN'S PUBLIC VISION

The first, and perhaps most basic, finding from our interviews is that many women do claim moral agency and a public voice as political and religious leaders. Conservative, moderate, and progressive women feel compelled to bring that agency into public life by their sense of individual responsibility for the collective well-being of their communities. Many bring a very personal sense of that responsibility to their work, justifying it as a calling from God or even the result of an epiphany. Others feel a less personalized need to put their faith and values in action. Virtually all the women interviewed, though, feel compelled to bring their faith into community, as a way to promote the values they hold dear, to fulfill their sense of religious obligation, or even to engage others as a way to better know God and their faith. These ideas are explored in chapter 2 of the report.

A fundamental difference dividing the women interviewed is in how they interpret their relationship with God, particularly as it plays out in their approaches to issues of religious salvation, the links between politics and morality, and social justice. As chapter 3 finds, women who are active in conservative political work directed at so-called “cultural issues,” such as reproductive rights, sex education, or gay marriage, generally describe a God who is loving and personal but also more intervening and judging. They see their work as an effort to defend traditional moral standards and are partially motivated by a hope to win God’s favor, particularly at a societal level. In contrast, women who work on what they see as social welfare issues (including a few who see issues such as reproductive rights in this light) describe a hope to serve a less judgmental and more nurturing God through caring for the disadvantaged or alleviating inequality. They speak less frequently about the idea of salvation, and when they do it is more inwardly focused, rather than being a concern about saving others.

We explore the moral values of religious women who work in the social justice area in more detail in chapter 4. At a basic level, women religious social justice activists feel compelled to leave the world a better place through service to others. Many

Women are bringing a set of values, particularly those focused on relationships and connectedness, that are often considered more appropriate to the “private” or family sphere to public life. They are calling for integrating these values with more traditionally “public” values, such as the emphasis on protecting individual rights.

describe values of compassion, love, and peace as compelling them to activism. Most articulate a sense of interconnectedness with others, which they see as requiring them to work for the betterment of their communities; this is one of the most prominent themes articulated. Many women also describe a hope to protect what they see as the inherent worth and dignity of all people, another particularly prominent theme. All of these values are tied to a need to build a society that reconnects individuals, particularly across the lines of race, religion, and socioeconomic status. The women interviewed see these relationships as one of the best ways to improve societal and individual well-being.

The values articulated by the social justice activists we interviewed provide a model for rethinking American politics, rights, and social policy. These values emphasize community, mutuality, and collective responsibility, ideas that supplement and contextualize ideas about individual rights. The women social justice activists we interviewed have a deep understanding that our lives and decisions impact others, and that we all must, therefore, act in a responsible way on behalf of others and our larger community, in order to respect and protect the agency of us all. In some ways, this theme is rooted in long-standing values and traditions from the theologies of religious denominations, as well as American social movements such as the civil rights movement. In other ways, women are bringing a set of values, particularly those focused on relationships and connectedness, that are often considered more appropriate to the “private” or family sphere than to public life. They are calling for integrating these values with more traditionally “public” values, such as the emphasis on protecting individual rights.

Importantly, with this comes a new potential way to think about American values and the role of civil society. When women were shut out of public life by democratic and religious theories of morality and public authority, women’s experiences—experiences of the private sphere—were relegated to secondary status, so that values associated with family and private life were given short shrift in public life. This includes, for example, values of mutuality and shared responsibility, which are much less visible in political discourse than the values of individual rights. Much of how we talk about politics and policy, even around issues affecting women and people of color such as poverty, racism, and sexism, is still tied to rights, whether they are political, economic, or social: the right to work, the right to equal opportunities, even the right to a living or family wage. The centrality of rights in American politics is even evident in the adoption of rights-based language as a tool of contemporary and recent movements devoted to advancing the status of disadvantaged communities, such as the women’s rights or welfare rights movements (Gelb and Palley 1996; West 1981).

But the public vision articulated by women in this study provides a new way of thinking about the model of individual rights. Their vision calls on members of the community to work together, as individuals and a group, to promote the social welfare of us all. It asks that the basic idea of rights that is so central to our understanding of democracy be infused with a sense of responsibility that is at least as important—and inseparable from—those rights. It does not call for replacing

government's role in developing and implementing the social policies that will address inequalities, but it does call for individuals to work in relationship with government and each other to alleviate them, and to consider the impact of individual decisions or even inaction on communities and society. And it calls on both individuals and government to provide ways for us all to do so, regardless of our resources—it calls for addressing the ways that money, time, education, personal connections, and other resources create inequalities in democratic engagement. In all these ways, women's public vision demands respect for the agency and authority of citizens of all kinds to participate in defining and promoting their needs.

The generalizations presented here call for two caveats. First, we are not arguing that women's public vision is part of their essential, natural, or biologically determined nature, but instead is rooted in a set of

Women's public vision can transform not only the "moral values" debate but politics in general. Women could change and revitalize progressive politics, religious institutions, and women's movements.

experiences that reflect U.S. gender roles and norms of the past several centuries, with all their changes and lack of change. Even though in many ways women are breaking out of those roles, in other ways they are still caught in them. As a society, we have not yet revamped private roles as thoroughly as we have public roles—women have taken on far more of men's traditional rights and responsibilities than men have taken on women's. This in turn is part of why we have not yet revamped public life to include women fully and equally. The ways that women experience private and public life differ from how men do, overall, and shape the values, resources, and responsibilities they have or can access. Women still do the bulk of caregiving, and men do not—so public life is not family-friendly and men are not, as a rule, as aware as women are of what it takes to care for others.

Second, our emphasis on gender is not meant to deny that there are other important ways in which women's experiences are shaped by their identities. Race and ethnicity have their own legacies of limitations on access to power. People of color, for example, have experienced—sometimes in lethal ways—their own forms of exclusion from public political roles. Legal discrimination against their political participation extended even longer for many people of color than it did for white women. The legacies of these histories were evident in our interviews. African American women, for example, note that political violence as a form of intimidation, not to mention the institution of slavery, still constrains their sense of political agency. Hispanic and Asian American women note that their histories, too, shape their experiences: the instability and vulnerability of migrant workers, the legacy of World War II internment, and discrimination based on looks and language (or assumptions about language) have all served to discourage their public voices. Among Arab American women, recent history has resulted in targeted hatred and violence based on the actions of male (and female) terrorists, who often share at most an ethnic or religious background.

Religion plays its own role in these dynamics. African American women have benefited from and shaped the liberation theologies and activism of Black Christian churches. In some cases, they have been able to carve out their own space and voice in those churches; in others, they continue to face denials of their moral agency and authority both within their communities and in the United States as a whole (e.g., Higginbotham 1993; Dodson 2002). Like white Christian and Jewish women, their agency is questioned, but the impact of race is at least as important: nowhere is this more evident than in the debate over single motherhood, which often implicitly blames poor African American women, and their “immoral” behavior, for a variety of social ills. Hispanic women, many of whom are Catholic, also find community in their churches, but research suggests that their relatively low levels of political participation, compared with whites and African Americans, may partially result from a lack of recruitment or encouragement from within their churches, which have more hierarchical and less participatory structures than Protestant congregations (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Islamic women share with Christian and Jewish women traditions that deny women’s moral agency or authority, often compounded by ignorance or hatred from non-Muslims, as well as by embarrassment and anger from their own communities if they challenge limitations on their roles. Buddhist and Hindu women face their own cultural restrictions on activism; as noted above, in some ways their traditions have fewer embedded questions about their public roles as religious leaders, but in other ways, their histories are just as exclusionary.

Throughout the report, we consider how differences in race and religion shape the values and experiences of women in the United States as they go about their activist work. We find, for example, that one legacy of restrictions on the agency of women of color, in religion, politics, and society, is a heightened sense of discomfort with claiming a public role. We also find, though, that women of color and those from smaller U.S. religions are more likely to translate their religious values beyond a sense of caring and compassion to a concern for justice. And they are more likely to describe a sense of interconnectedness as a value inspiring their activism. These findings seem to stem from two sources: a commitment to such values in the religious traditions of many women of color, and their experiences with the exclusion and subordination of their communities.

At the same time, despite these differences, women from a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds share many ways of thinking and talking about their values and visions. Some of these commonalities are evident in how women from diverse heritages describe their motivations, values, and experiences, using similar language and imagery, throughout this report. As a way for readers to see both similarities and differences among women, we include basic information about the race or ethnicity and religion of the women quoted in this report.

Overall, the goals of this report are to understand how women define their religious values, how they apply them to their lives and activism, and how they can successfully promote their public vision and moral authority in civic and political life. We have looked for both differences and commonalities across race, class, and religion.

Finally, although we argue that women activists are claiming authority in important ways, we do not argue that their work is completed. Chapter 5 outlines some of the ways that women in religious social justice groups describe remaining limitations on their work as activists and leaders, including their own hesitation to claim a public voice. It also outlines ways that women have overcome hesitation and resistance, particularly through mechanisms designed to recognize the distinct experiences and values of women's lives and to include women's voices in the design and implementation of organizing tools. The chapter is designed to help organizations interested in promoting women's moral, religious, and political authority to develop effective strategies that can encourage their voice and leadership (this topic will also be addressed in more detail in future publications in this series).

WOMEN AND THE MORAL VALUES DEBATE

After we did the interviews for this report, the 2004 elections were held—raising the visibility of and changing the tone of the moral values debates. As is now widely known, moral values topped the list of issues that voters said were important to them in exit polls. This finding has been spun, explained, and rejected in a variety of ways. Some people point out that the 2004 exit polls allowed voters only seven choices to explain why they voted how they did, and “moral values” was qualitatively different from the other, more narrowly defined choices, which included taxes, education, Iraq, terrorism, the economy/jobs, and health care (e.g., Langer 2004; Teixeira 2004). Other people attributed the visibility of gay marriage and abortion as mobilizing issues for cultural conservatives (e.g., Antle 2004). Still others argued that this view of moral values is too narrow and, citing follow-up polls, claimed that the “moral values” most important to voters were concepts such as “greed and materialism,” “poverty and economic justice,” or even “honesty” (Cooperman 2004; HarrisInteractive 2004). Progressive leaders have begun to think about their own moral values and how to tie them to politics, with many casting their views on war and poverty in scriptural and value-laden language. Regardless of what actually happened, the 2004 elections certainly triggered a debate over what exactly American moral values are, who gets to interpret them, and how political leaders should use them (or not) as they go about policymaking and political campaigning.

Strikingly, the discussion that has developed has not involved many of the central concepts that we heard described by religious women working as social justice activists as they discussed elements of their public visions. For the most part (although with some exception), relationships among individuals, government, and community are not being rethought in the ways that the women we interviewed suggest would be important, toward the development of a stronger sense of shared responsibility among citizens and government, to supplement ideas stressing individual rights and well-being, and toward increased respect for the agency and authority of women, people of color, and other disadvantaged groups.

Women themselves are also largely invisible as leaders in the debate over moral values—despite the fact that many “moral values” issues are focused on women's

lives and bodies. Abortion and contraception are obvious examples. But in the period since the 2004 elections, issues that have been presented by progressives as “moral” also disproportionately affect women. Women, for example, are 50 percent more likely than men to live in poverty, and single mothers are particularly likely to do so. When women are central to the debate over poverty, though, it has largely involved efforts to promote marriage among them—and to attack what is portrayed as the immorality and moral decline of low-income women. In these and other debates, changes in women’s lives over the past decades are often at stake in the fight over “moral values.”

In chapter 6, we argue that women’s public vision can transform not only the “moral values” debate but politics in general. We argue that women could change and revitalize several American institutions: progressive politics, religious institutions, and women’s movements. By incorporating the ideas of shared responsibility and mutuality into policy debates, progressives can bring a new understanding of political rights and responsibilities to their approach to politics. Doing so could not only breathe fresh air into those debates, but it could mobilize many people currently alienated by progressive politics—including many of the women we interviewed, and probably many more like them—progressives who have an entirely different view of morality and moral values from the de-contextualized absolutes that are usually described. Religious institutions, too, could benefit from considering how women’s visions might inform their values and traditions, including those concerning moral authority, perhaps transforming these concepts in recognition of women’s voices and agency.

Finally, the women we interviewed provide insight into a potential source of ideas and energy to inspire a new wave of women’s organizing. In challenging male authority, and particularly white male authority, the women social justice activists we interviewed share a common experience with many feminists in the United States. Although there are not particularly strong ties between U.S. women’s movements and the religious social justice groups involved in this study, both are calling for a rethinking of male authority and the place of women and women’s values, whether implicitly or explicitly. The two communities also share a basic commitment to fighting economic, social, and political inequality. In this, there is potential for more connections and collaborations between the two communities. Both movements could benefit from such relationships in their work to build supports for low-income and other disadvantaged Americans.

The women interviewed for this study, and millions like them, can help redefine American moral and political values by informing them with women’s experiences. We hope that this report, by describing their work and ideas, provides both a model and inspiration. We also hope that the report will generate debate over how to incorporate women’s public visions into discussions of policy and moral values, among political leaders, religious leaders, and the women’s movement.

“The Work of God is Work in the World”: Faith as a Call to Action

“The work of God is work in the world, and ... my faith is really integral to who I am, always. There’s not a dualism between how I live my life as a Christian and how I live my life any other way. There’s no other way, there’s no other person.... There are not rules I follow if I were a Christian or if I weren’t.”

Faith is central to many women’s lives. Among the women we interviewed, it defines their core values, how they relate to other people, and how they think about their place in the world. Across religious traditions, racial and ethnic differences, socioeconomic status, and political worldviews, the importance of faith to identity is a common and compelling theme.

The quote opening this chapter, for example, comes from a white Episcopalian woman with a long history of progressive activism and community organizing in the Northeast and Southeast. She has spent much of her life involved in progressive politics, in campaigns to reform labor practices, stop wars, and promote housing for low-income communities.

Yet the importance of her faith to her core values and identity is echoed by a white, evangelical Christian woman who has worked in the leadership of both local and national conservative organizations: “There’s absolutely no way to separate out my Christian beliefs from my leadership or from who I am. It’s a very essential part of who I am. And I don’t know how I would survive any of the responsibilities I have or from day to day, because number one, there’s so much of life that you do not have control over.”

Both are echoed in turn by a Muslim woman who works on behalf of women’s rights: “I don’t see spiritual and political and—all of those are all blended, because

What is compelling about the faith of these women is their desire to apply it to their lives in a seamless way, in part by participating in some form of civic, and often political, activism.

the requirements of us as Muslims in terms of fighting against oppression, being just and honest in our dealings, and so forth, permeate every aspect of our life. So every day is a faith-oriented day, as opposed to just looking at rituals and prayer and fasting and then looking at your life. They’re completely blended into one, so that shapes everything we do.”

This theme was even expressed by some women who are not actively involved in congregational life. For example, a woman who only rarely attends her congregation

notes that faith “connects me to something bigger and reminds me of my power to make things better for humanity.”

If faith is important to the women we interviewed, it is likewise important to many Americans. The vast majority of us—over 95 percent—claim to believe in “God or a universal spirit,” and around two-thirds claim that we have no doubts at all about God’s existence. Less than 10 percent claim not to believe in God, or don’t know and don’t think there’s a way to find out (Bishop 1999). Many Americans also count themselves as religious in some way: studies find from half to three-quarters of Americans are affiliated with a congregation, and at least 80 percent consider themselves adherents of some denomination.¹ Women are more likely to report being active in religious institutions than men. For example, in one survey more than half (55 percent) of all women reported attending religious services regularly, while less than half (43 percent) of men did (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). In our sample, religious involvement is even higher. Nine of ten of the women interviewed are affiliated with a congregation. Of course, it is not surprising that most of the women (and men) we interviewed see their faith as central to their lives, since we found most of them working in groups with some kind of implicit or explicit religious content—even if they simply work with congregations or other religious groups as a political strategy.

What is compelling about the faith of these women, though, is their desire to apply it to their lives in a seamless way, in part by participating in some form of civic, and often political, activism. The women we interviewed argue passionately that their relationship with God brings with it a higher calling, beyond joining or attending services in a church, a synagogue, a mosque, or a temple. They provide direct services to those in need, organize communities to improve the quality of life, and work to change unjust policies. They frame their activism as a calling from God or a way to bear witness to their faith by how they live. Many see it as a form of ministry. Some even consider it an alternative to worship, since it so embodies their core religious or faith values. For many women, then, activism is a way to bring the work of God to the world.

It is equally important, though, that the women activists we interviewed feel the ability—and in fact the responsibility—to work publicly to promote their own moral vision based on their religious values. In doing so, they are claiming religious or moral authority: they feel confident representing their religious values in a public way through their community activism, and they are appropriating those values and interpreting them. Many articulate their compulsion to do so as their own, individual callings from God, not filtered through the religious authority of another person. These women, then, are claiming moral authority for their own, a step that allows them to create and promote their own public visions. They are articulating their religious and moral agency.

¹ Membership in and affiliation with congregations or denominations is very difficult to measure; these figures are estimates from Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Jones, et al., 2002; and Wald 2003.

A CALLING FROM GOD

Many women see their activism as a calling or vocation from God. The idea is so basic that some have a difficult time articulating it. They see their political and civic work as something they are just supposed to do, so self-evident that it can hardly be put into words. Often, women express their sense of calling with a story that describes how it is revealed to them.

For example, a white, progressive Episcopalian describes her decision to volunteer her help to the founder of a new organization devoted to international justice issues:

We came at it together as a result of prayer. I just took the risk and sent him an email and proposed an absolutely outlandish arrangement [laughs] from any kind of practical real world sense, and yet in the heart it just was so right. He arrived at his office that morning to pick up that e-mail, and he had just been in church saying, ‘Thank you, thank you, help, help,’ because he just wasn’t sure how he could advance this without somebody to help. And here I was. In a lot of rational ways, or traditionally rational ways, it doesn’t make sense, but we know that we’re supposed to be doing what we’re doing. And so ... there’s a huge faith journey with this.

This story describes a fiercely personal calling from God, and a sense that those involved were nudged toward each other, even within the context of their own decisions. Interestingly, this kind of story fits with American understandings of God, which tend to be personal and intimate, based on a perception that God can and will intervene (Bader and Froese 2005). A sense of individual and even personalized vocation makes good sense within this understanding, and it is articulated by many of the women we interviewed.

While the idea of personal calling was common among women from many religious, racial, and political backgrounds, it was most prominent among those from a Christian denomination.

Take the following examples:

A Latina Catholic who ran for office, inspired by her activist work:

I did it because I knew. And I went to church and I could feel the energy. I could feel that I could do it. And at that point, I did know that I felt the calling from God. I did. I did. And maybe I mistook God for my calling, my own calling. Maybe God wasn’t even calling me. But I think, I really, truly believe that.

A white Lutheran who felt nudged to her activist career by God:

I really believe—I believe that God opened this door for me, because I went to the service fair, and Mercy Corps was mobbed, and so was Jesuit Volunteer Corps and all these Catholic programs that everyone had heard of. And these lonely LVC-ers [representatives from the Lutheran

I BEGAN TO DO MIRACULOUS THINGS: ACTIVISM INSPIRED BY EPIPHANY

While many women feel a calling to activism, for one set of women we interviewed, that calling was revealed in a tangible and visceral way, through what might be called epiphanies. For many Americans, the idea of an epiphany is more abstract than real: either an out-of-date concept, or a metaphor for coming up with a new idea. But for some of the women we interviewed, epiphanies are associated with a turning point in their life that led them to action. They have been experienced as an actual communication with or from God that feels as real as talking with another person. Such epiphanies have inspired several of the women we interviewed to change the direction and goals of their lives.

The women experiencing epiphanies come from the left and the right; some were white and some were African American. All were Christian. Two conservative Christians, for example, describe their revelations, both of which inspired them to political activism. The first describes her experience as inspiring her to take her religious values into politics:

I had an epiphany in 1978. I had a face-to-face encounter with God and became very aware of my languishing spiritual self. I started getting into scripture, reading a lot of the great Christian writers, C.S. Lewis, Thomas Merton... and different conservative writers. And my spiritual eyes became open to the fact that our culture was really in demise, as far as the things that concerned me as a conservative Christian—social values, etc. I became compelled to get involved into the political arena. I saw that as the avenue that God was directing me toward in order to impact our culture for righteousness.... I told the Lord, 'I know you didn't save me to be a benchwoman. But I'm not sure where you want me to go with this. I know I have this energy and enthusiasm and excitement'.... When I got home and picked up my mail, I had an invitation to attend a fundraising reception for a man who was running for governor.... I met with him and he hired me to be part of his campaign. And I saw that as a direct answer, as the direction that I was to go in.

A second conservative woman describes an epiphany that came at a particularly dark time in her life:

I remember looking in the mirror wondering where in the world [I] was, because I had become someone I didn't like, self-centered, egotistical, didn't really give a flip about anybody but me. And so when I was at the point of contemplating suicide, okay, walking around the streets.... I was tired, and I wanted out. And so I had a very supernatural encounter with God, and God got my attention in a mighty way that day. I saw my life on a flip chart, the Bible talks about what we do is recorded, I saw my recording, how God did it I have no idea, but... after the encounter with God, I started studying the word of God from a different perspective, and why am I here, why did You make me. And when I read that—and I had a hard time forgiving myself, I felt like I had committed the lowest sin possible,

and when I read that God looks on the heart, that started turning me to having confidence, that it didn't matter if people didn't forget or forgive, that God—what, how He viewed me was the most important, and that some day I wanted to hear, 'Well done my good and faithful servant.'

In both cases, a face-to-face experience with God led to an important life change that involved, for these women, a devotion to political activism. The initial epiphany was followed by God “nudging” each woman toward their calling afterward—it was by no means a one-time communication that was completely clear in its message, and in each case it was followed by a sense of choice to follow the path laid out. Each woman needed help interpreting her calling, which she found in reading scripture and other books, in prayer, and through what she saw as apocryphal events.

The epiphany experience in both cases is also interesting because it inspired each woman toward a new kind of relationship with public life on behalf of God. Among Christians, this kind of epiphany has been compared to the experience of the apostles after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, when the Holy Spirit inspired them to see themselves as embodying Christ, which then “empowered them to conquer their insecurities and go out into the world to help others” (Mahoney and Pargament 2004, 487). Some scholars argue that this can be a particularly important experience for women, for whom a public voice and activism are often discouraged by social, political, and even religious norms about their proper roles (Mahoney and Pargament 2004). It is also a way that women can claim religious authority for themselves as a direct mandate from God.

Epiphanies are not restricted to the experience of conservative women. Two progressive women describe similar revelations about their callings (although unlike the conservative women above, both are ordained ministers). The first is a white Presbyterian, who describes the experience of discovering her calling:

I was really ready to move on. And I had been looking at a church in Denver that had a very innovative kind of ministry.... And I was about to commit to that when a friend of mine called, a woman I had been in seminary with, and called me and said they were starting a program for prostitutes [in their city], and they wanted me to apply for the church as the directorship.... I couldn't imagine what they thought of me that my name would come up in this particular context. In my mind, I had already gone to Denver. That was obviously where God was calling me.... She must have called me the minute the thing hit her mailbox, and said we want you to come up for an interview.... I knew nothing about prostitution. So I went to the [city] library to check out a book, find something I could read about prostitution. Well, they had one book in the card file that had the word 'prostitute' in the file. It took me and three librarians half a day to find this book. And it had been misshelved with all of the leprosy books.... It should have probably been some kind of omen to me that, indeed, this particular

book on prostitution had been misfiled with the leprosy books.... [At the interview, we] must have talked for two hours, which even to Presbyterian standards is a significant length of time. And [the minister] took me back to his office while they talked about our interviews and said, you know they're going to offer you the job, don't you? And I just went oh, my God. No...So anyway, they sure did. They offered me the job, and I basically said if you want an answer right now it's no. If you'll give me a week or two to pray about this, to think about it, I'll get back to you. But if you want an answer right now, I just can't imagine myself doing this. So they were cool with that. No problem at all. I flew back [on a small] four-seat Cessna kind of thing. And I remember bobbing around out there over the mountains, just white knuckling this flight all the way, and thinking—I was terrified. But there was this very clear realization that it wasn't the airplane that was scaring me. It was the thought that God was really calling me to do this. I was like, oh, God. I got home. I woke up the next morning, and the first thought that flashed through my head was how do I tell my mother? So at that level, I knew that this was what God wanted.

Finally, an African American Baptist minister describes her epiphany as related to her understanding that her religious values can be applied to politics and power:

My pastor said I want you to go to one of these organizing things.... So I went because being a good Baptist, and particularly an African American Baptist, if your pastor asks you to do something you do it. It was at a Catholic Church, white Catholic church in [the city]. In the fellowship hall there were Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims, and there was probably even a Jewish person at that time, and I thought oh, this is wonderful, I thought this was really great. Well, there was this obnoxious little Italian white man on the floor... and I had never seen anyone so obnoxious in my life. He was talking about power and self-interest, and I go oh my God, this is repulsive, I am offended, oh my goodness. I said this is not Christian. Christians are supposed to be self-sacrificing. I said this is obnoxious, and I went back and I wrote a five-page dossier as to why Christians should not be involved in faith-based organizing, and particularly African Americans.... So I had what was pretty much a Damascus Road experience.... I was going to work one day in [my city], and on a very dangerous street... so it was like the Damascus Road, which was very dangerous—and I heard this voice that came from my gut. I didn't hear it audibly, I heard it from my gut, and it said you've been called by God, anointed by the Holy Spirit and covered with the blood of Jesus, and nothing will stop you from speaking for me, nothing will stop you from doing my work. Well, I am freaking out, okay, I am crying and driving and I'm going—there's nobody in the car but me, and I am freaking out, I am shaking and crying, I'm going berserk, really, I'm going berserk, I'm going there's nobody in the car but me.... I call my pastor right away... he said, I think you're being called to preach... so I stopped going to

church... because I didn't want this, I didn't ask for this, and I wasn't perfect, God had made a mistake, and I told him go get the chairman of the deacon board, he wants to preach, I don't, I am married, I wear makeup, I'm a woman, I don't want to do this. So I would have these very extensive conversations with God, and He didn't change His mind, and I really did everything I could to get Him to change His mind. I really did. I offered Him other sacrifices, I really did, but when I became—I got to the point where I was dying, that I was forced back to church and I had a dream, another—I had a dream, and there was a woman that I had not seen since high school, who is a lawyer now, but she was standing over me in a black robe in this dream. And she had a colored newspaper and on the colored newspaper had praying hands, a stained-glass window, and a Bible, and she said to me in the dream, 'Can't you see it?' That was Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and I went to church.... Well, I was going up for prayer and out comes of my mouth that I have been called to preach. And the Holy Spirit just broke out in the church, and it's like everybody knew it but me.... And not long after that, Pastor did not but one thing but said okay, now I want you to go back to one of those organizer trainings... and I've never looked back. And then from there I went to week-long training and I got some clarity about what I needed to do, what I had been called to do, and I got some clarity that I needed all of the relationships that I could possibly get, and I got clarity that the power did not come from [my community organization], but [the community organization] taught me how to use it, and that was the clarity that I got. So I came back from training and I just began to do quite miraculous things.

The stories told by these women are compelling and apocryphal accounts of a mandate to play an important role in the lives of their communities. In the last case in particular, the experience empowered a woman to take on a specifically political role in her religious calling, one that she had resisted before her epiphany. Experiencing God this way allowed her to take this message out into the world with confidence as a public, political, and religious leader.

It is possible, of course, that in each case, the women we interviewed crafted their stories to give their activism credibility with others, including those they might lead. Epiphanies, though, are increasingly understood by psychology as more common than we might think in contemporary American society, and as experiences that are both different from incremental change and often accompanied by drastic changes in values, priorities, and relationships (Miller 2004). For the women we interviewed, they are described vividly and apparently experienced as real and important moments that empowered them to work for change on behalf of their faith. Thus they have been a way for women to claim their own political and religious voices. Like other ways that women experience callings, epiphanies give women religious authority and agency.

Volunteer Corps] were sitting, they were sitting there and no one was talking to them. And so I thought, well, there's the table for me. I'm like the Lutheran in the Catholic college, you know. And so I just walked up to this empty table and we talked about a half an hour and I was hooked.

Even when women do not have a specific story to tell about how their calling was revealed to them, they still often describe their work as stemming from a sense of divine vocation, something that God specifically wants them to do, and as resulting from a personal relationship with God.

An African American Christian describes her work as fulfilling God's will: "I don't do the work for the change. I do the work because I believe this is what God wanted me to do. So I'm a servant."

A white, progressive, evangelical sees God's hand in who works at her organization:

I feel a real calling for the work, right? I feel like there's some—that, on some level, I'm called to do what I'm doing, and that it is not an accident that I'm here, and I don't—my staff sometimes thinks I'm a little on the edge in terms of this stuff, but I tell people, I think God sent you here. I don't think it's an accident that most people in my staff are there, you know? They were brought here. We were brought to do the work. So—and that they happen to be women, I don't think it's an accident. They were all called to do this.

A white Jewish woman sees her work as answering the basic question of life: "For me, a sense of meaning, that's the most basic religious question there is: Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? This is what I'm supposed to do."

A Hispanic Catholic sees activist work as where she is most content: "I do feel called to do this type of work. I don't think I can see myself in a major corporation or producing weapons or things like that. Even if I were making ten times what I make I wouldn't be happy. I wouldn't feel that I am in the right place."

A white Catholic describes a similar feeling:

Since I've been here, I have to tell you, in a spiritual sense, I felt like this is really where God intended for me to be, because there have been incredible moments of grace here that have just confirmed that this is the place for me to be. It was part of a spiritual quest, I guess. That's a good way to put it. . . . A lot of the people we serve don't have a strong voice in the community and so you are called to be that voice. You are called to understand that role, life on the streets so to speak, life without resources, and you have to respond. So, I would use the word transformation versus politicizing because you are transformed. You may speak only in your community, you may speak only in your church, but I can't imagine not being called to speak.

For all these women, activism comes almost as an explicit request from God, something that a divine presence makes clear should be central to each woman's life. For many, the call is more personal than a sense of general obligation or responsibility, instead articulated as a particular route that a particular woman is meant to pursue. It does not necessarily follow that the women quoted here do not see their activism as a choice, but many express a sense that God made their choices easier, by opening a door or nudging them in some direction.

The idea of individual calling from God is particularly interesting because it allows women to appropriate the idea of moral or religious agency for themselves. In evoking God as mandating their work as religious activists and leaders, women claim

In evoking God as mandating their work as religious activists and leaders, women claim the highest authority they can to justify their work.

the highest authority they can to justify their work. As a strategy, this allows women to bypass male religious authority and to overcome questions about their “proper” roles, since questioning their work becomes questioning God's will. Undoubtedly, the women who say they felt a calling did, in fact, do so—they were not lying to give their work weight. But their calling also gave them a sense of moral power and authority, an important step in their ability to publicly define and promote their moral visions. In an important way, this step is quite radical, because it presumes that women have a direct connection to God, and therefore to interpreting their relationship to God and to morality—exactly the kind of authority and connection that most religions traditionally deny them.

FAITH IN ACTION

Many women also describe their activism as a way to put their faith in action. This idea is perhaps most poignantly expressed by a group of women who, when asked about the links between their activism and faith, would pause, a bit at a loss for words, and then answer with a story or example epitomizing how interwoven activism and faith are to them. “It's hard to separate the two” was a common response. Or as one woman said, “For me it's like breathing. I don't know the how of it—it just is.” Another said, “It's something that happens natural. With me, it's just there. It's just there.”

When asked about how her activism informs her faith, an activist for immigrant rights does not directly answer the question, instead responding with a discussion of her recent justice efforts, including some on the trafficking of women:

...I think you have to educate people on what trafficking is and who's responsible, because right now they're blaming the women on the street.... And so by the end of the year, I will have visited twelve groups in the parish on this trafficking of women and children in order to give them

some kind of education.... And I think that's part of spirituality, of who we are and what we're all about.

Similarly, another activist responds by evoking the image of St. Francis, whose model she tries to follow in her life and activism:

I can share a book with you—it's making my heart sing. I always was attracted to the time in St. Francis's life when he had gone off to the crusades, had gone to the sultan, and then for three years I believe, traveled in the Holy Land.... I mean here he was, somebody who is a rich man's son and a playboy and a fine dandy, the entertainment of Assisi, and all of that [laughs], he has this transformation in his life which drives him into this absolutely extreme level of asceticism and poverty and all of that.... So I'm reading this book now that's been written, that's taking a look at the very early Franciscan rule and asking what was the relationship. And it just makes my heart sing [laughs], because it talks about how Francis' vision was really just about living the life, it wasn't about going out on a stump and preaching the gospel, unless it seemed right to do, but that wasn't the primary thing, it was just that you lived it, you just tried to love everyone, you tried to be helpful to everyone, it was a very simple message and he did it without a whole bunch of pettiness and that kind of thing, and that just speaks to me as something—I can't put words to it, it's just so profoundly true, that there is just—the spiritual journey is about un-learning all of the things that our culture has taught us and getting back to this very, very, very basic sense of being able to see Christ in all people.... And so it's this book that is just naming that for me, and it's something that I have felt always.

This discussion of St. Francis vividly evokes a second theme related to the idea of putting faith into action, and also expressed by many of the women we interviewed: a desire to bear witness to one's faith through actions instead of words. As many of the quotes below indicate, these themes were often expressed as integrally linked.

The dual ideas of putting faith into action and bearing witness were common to women across faith traditions. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and even Baha'i women articulated them. Two Catholic women, one white and one Hispanic, express the two themes:

Being a person of faith is very important. It is really important. I mean, you don't have to mention God in your meetings. You don't have to tell them what church you go to. But people eventually know. I think it's putting your faith in practice.

Your faith life is not something you restrict to Sunday mass or to explicitly religious activities. Your faith life has to permeate your being. There's no way to compartmentalize it. So in everything you do, you are proclaiming, or you should be.... It should be our goal, our aim, to always proclaim the gospel in every action that you do. So whether it's just eating and being

with your family or in your professional work, in the way you treat your co-workers, in the way you spend your free time.

This woman summarizes the joy she gets from this approach to her work: “What’s the most important thing I’ve gotten out of my work? I get to work for Christ.”

The desire to put faith into action, and bear witness, are by no means just Catholic ideas, however. Other Christians expressed similar ideas. A Latina Latter Day Saint says, for example, “I like to share with them—they are special, they are very important, they can take my help.... I don’t talk about my beliefs and my

Putting faith into action is not just a way to fulfill a personal ethic, but a strategy to spread values.

religion, because this is not important. The more important [thing] is they feel love.” An African American Eastern Orthodox woman also sees her activism as living out her faith: “We don’t compartmentalize, so thought, word, and deed are all together.” Two Christian evangelicals, one conservative and one progressive, also describe their activism this way, although with more of an explicit focus on witnessing:

I think that I give a Christian witness in the way that I live. There may be times when a family member or friend is going through a hard time and I witness to them in words as a personal testimony of my faith. Other than that, by the way I live, I witness what my faith is. I live out my faith.

I do think that evangelism is a part of what my call is on earth. I don’t any longer think that it’s about me preaching the good news and having altar calls. But I do think it’s about being a Christian witness in terms of my actions in the world.

Among women who feel a need to bear witness in this way, putting faith into action is not just a way to fulfill a personal ethic, but a strategy to spread their values. For most, it is specifically tied to activism as a way to show off the ethics they hold dear. In this sense, it can be thought of as reinterpreting the idea of evangelizing: these women see their actions—including their activism—as a way to spread faith, particularly within a modern and more pluralistic society.

It is not surprising that Christians would cast their activism in this light, since most Christian denominations have a long and continuing history of evangelizing, with the main purpose of “saving souls,” a goal that women have long been part of (Dries 1998; Noll 2004; Robert 1996; Yao 2002). It is also not surprising that the idea would be closely linked to service, activism, and social welfare. Even for many proclaimed missionary denominations, bettering the social welfare of the communities where they serve has long been a central goal (Allen 2002; Brouwer 1989; Chu 2004; Edwards and Gifford 2003; Semple 2003; Tucker 1989; Weisenfeld 1997). One example of this is the social gospel tradition, which emerged within American evangelicalism at the end of the 19th century, partially in reaction to the economic and social hardship associated with industrialization and urbanization. It

argued for a form of national salvation achieved by restructuring society on Christian principles, to supplement the traditional focus on personal salvation. Women played an important role in the development and spread of the social gospel, in both white and African American churches (Edwards and Gifford 2003; Higginbotham 1993). The 20th century also saw major changes in U.S. Protestantism, with what would become “mainline” denominations splitting with more fundamentalist traditions to adopt more modernist viewpoints—for example, less literal readings of scripture and

*“As moral people, as people of faith...we have not only the responsibility,
we have the challenge to our faith [to act for social justice].”*

more consideration of scientific and socioeconomic change (Bendroth 1993). With this came a rethinking of evangelization to encompass an approach more focused on the idea of witness and social responsibility based on Christian values.

Pope Paul VI, for example, laid out a new way of thinking about evangelization for Catholics in 1975, which included an emphasis on witness and liberation:

The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal.... Evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development—a message especially energetic today about liberation” (Pope Paul VI 1975).

Many Protestant Christian denominations, particularly those considered mainline, have adopted similar approaches to justice, liberation, and evangelization by working to bear witness to Christian values, rather than converting nonbelievers (e.g., Bosch 1991; Chapman 1991). In this context, the focus of religious women on activism as a way to live out that witness makes sense.

The idea of witnessing faith, or putting faith into action, is taken another step by a set of women who see activism as a form of ministry. A compelling example of this comes from an African American Christian woman. An ordained minister despite a ban on women’s ordination in her religious tradition (she explains, “I was a part of a ministry where the pastor received a revelation from God that it was the right thing to do”), this woman has recast her ministry as integrally tied to activism around justice and inequality:

Part of my ministry, part of what I do and the work that I do...is to bring people of faith together, including Muslims and Buddhists, Christians, to bring them together to challenge all of us to ask those questions about our economic, social, and political policy that is enhancing or destructive to human existence. And where we find it to be destructive, do we not have a responsibility to challenge those systems that are being destructive?

And I think as moral people, as people of faith, that we have not only the responsibility, we have the challenge to our faith. If we don't do it, our faith is filthy rags; it ain't worth diddly squat [laughs]. So I move out of that understanding. My being is based on my doing what I believe to be a responsibility.

Even women who lack the title of clergy talk about their activism as a form of ministry. As a white Christian conservative says,

I do believe, as in the book of Jeremiah, that in my mother's womb He was forming and making me with what I would need to accomplish His will on earth. And so I'm kind of like a secret agent for God, travelling incognito as a political activist [laughs]. I've always had a mission, is the way I see it. . . . I say I'm a doctor sometimes, trying to pick people up and help their wounds.

An African American Christian also expresses her compulsion to help heal people's wounds:

We have people that come into our emergency referral program—they are broken. And what I mean by that is that they are already hurting. They don't want to ask for food or help with paying their rent and utilities. They don't want to say, I need a change of clothing, or do you have bus fare. In my heart I feel I just believe people really don't, and so spiritually you just can feel it and feel where they are coming from. Oftentimes God lay it on my heart, that when people come they may have an immediate need, but most of all need a little love, somebody to just simply say to them that it will be all right and a hug to let them know somebody cares. When people come in, it is like I am automatically drawn to them, and I would find myself ministering in a way.

For some Christians, the need to bear witness is also a way to change what they see as a negative image of their religious denominations. Here, the goal is to witness values and approaches that they see as misunderstood, as much as to attract new people to their religious tradition. That is, their work is partially motivated by a desire to improve the image of the Christian community. One conservative white Christian, for example, sees the work she does as a way to dispel myths about the irrationality of Christians:

So much of the secular community has criticized evangelicals and conservatives that we have not really been interested in research, that we have not been oriented toward research. And I thought, wow, here you've got a women's organization, a conservative organization. . . .and of all the things they could have chosen, they chose to establish a think tank. So I thought that was pretty impressive.

Progressive Christians, too, hope to change the image of their community—ironically, in part to reclaim what they see as the conservative image they have as Christian political activists. As two progressive white Christians argue,

I always viewed faith as allowing me to do this. Does that make any sense? It provided me with obviously the support, but it also gave me a reason to do it, because people, when they view religion and politics, tend to automatically make certain assumptions, immediately conjure up images of the [conservative right], and what that embodies in Christianity, but it seems to me that's not entirely the case, because—I am a walking example of that. I'm Christian, I'm a progressive Christian, and it's my faith that has allowed me to be so proactive within this movement.

I think it's kind of like being gay, or being bisexual, which I am, which is the same kind of—you just have to tell people so they can get over their ideas about it. I mean, to say 'Okay, I'm a Christian, now look at me for a while, maybe you'll see something you didn't think you would see.'

For these women, activism is inspired in part by a need to embody a progressive interpretation of Christian values for the larger world—again, a way to spread those values, this time in providing an alternative to the more conservative view that they think dominates most people's understandings.

While all of the above examples come from Christian women, the idea of witnessing or putting faith into action is articulated by women from a variety of faiths. A Baha'i woman, for instance, describes a hope to spread the basic values of her religion through her example:

Our prophet was Baha'u'llah, who came in the 19th century. 1844 is when he declared that he was a prophet from God, and he said this is the time that we need to establish peace on earth. And there's some basic principles that we have to live by to do this. One was unity of religions, unity of races, unity of mankind. So, because of that, any opportunity that appeals to us where we can establish that friendship and relationship, yes, we actively seek out.... Basically the way we are taught to be is—and I should say taught from the scriptures, because we do not have any ministry in our faith. First, we live the example, rather than proselytizing. Look at me and what I'm doing, and then make your judgment. That's how we extend our friendship.

For this woman, there is a mandate to spread her faith, but without preaching. And importantly, part of living out her values also involves speaking out for justice. She adds later:

As you go through life...and you are seeing injustice happen, I think everyone either will have an opportunity to correct what you see or you don't. And if you have an opportunity, of course, I think your faith encourages you to move forward and do something.

Muslim women also speak of the need to put faith into action and to bear witness through their actions rather than words. One, a white Muslim, describes it simply: "We built the mosques, and that's great. But you have to take it and apply that in somebody's daily life." Another, an Arab American, elaborates,

Islam was spread through behavior. When people went into other countries, the way they behaved from Islamic perspective is what captured the heart of others to convert and to become Muslim. It's not Islam—you are forbidden to go and convert people. That's not one of our pillars. It's not one of our Islamic values. You don't convert people. That's not what you do. You do dawa. You show them by the way you behave and the way you act. And that's what brings people to it. Islam is about peace. And the way you behave, the way you interact with others, is out of respect, and with modesty, and with dignity that people interact with you in the same manner.

Many Muslim women add a twist to the idea of witnessing their faith, one specifically related to their experiences as a minority group in the United States. For most of the Muslim women we interviewed, the experience of being Muslim (and often but not always Arab American) in the period since 9/11 has brought with it a need to witness their understanding of the true values of Islam, to replace what they see as the stereotypes of violence and terrorism that many Americans associate with their religion. In fact, this imperative is seen as a ministry itself, and for many Islamic women it is now the driving force behind their activism, even encouraging women to take on a more public and visible role than they otherwise might:

There was a need to bring peaceful women who were doing charitable deeds and spreading good will through various activities in their communities under one banner... It was very crucial for us to take part in a positive way in contributing to the community. And the thing that we focused on was good will gesture toward the community, spreading Islam in a very, very moderate way—telling them that we, telling the community that we are very normal people like any other people [laughs]. And that we wanted to spread good will, love, harmony, and just keeping the balance within the faith traditions and all that.

This theme was integral as a motivator for Muslim women: more than ever before, many feel a call to activism, based both on their basic religious values and as a way to create a better, and more accurate, image of their community.

Like women who describe their activism as a calling, women who describe their work as a way to put faith into action or to bear witness claim a certain kind of moral authority. Their claims that activism is the most authentic way to live out their faith, especially publicly, belie an assumption that they themselves can interpret their values and decide how best to live them in public life. Again, this claim involves appropriating a sense of moral authority.

TYING FAITH TO COMMUNITY

In and of themselves, the need to respond to a calling, put faith into action, or bear witness could be understood without any link to the broader world. There is no necessary connection to activism. Women (and men) could be called to a wide variety of goals and activities; faith could be put into action simply by acting politely

and kindly; bearing witness could be a passive way to spread values such as love or peace, without any kind of community- or justice-related orientation.

For the women we interviewed, however, all of these basic themes are linked integrally to *community*. In almost every case, they have come to activism by linking their faith to the broader world. Where they feel a calling, it is connected to serving others or to building some kind of systemic change. Where they seek to put faith into action, it is to create a better community, pursue better policies, and hold leaders

“Responsibility and community and vision—it’s just so compelling—of course this is what religion is about.”

accountable. Where they seek to bear witness to their religious values, it is not so much to spread individual salvation, but to strengthen those values in society and politics as a basis

for developing a more just world. Many of these women, of course, disagree about the world they are trying to achieve, but virtually all those we interviewed had a sense of connectedness and community responsibility.

These links are evident in the words used by women throughout this chapter: relationship, community, a focus on others. They are key to how most understand their place in the world as religious or spiritual people. As one woman says, “Responsibility and community and vision—it’s just so compelling—of course this is what religion is about.” Similarly, an Episcopal priest tells her story,

I think what got me involved in community activism was, when I was in college, the college chaplain was very concerned about labor practices and issues, even in our neighborhood, around peace and around the military industrial complex. And so one of the first things I did when I got involved in the chaplaincy program [in college] was to protest at [a defense contractor’s building]. And so that’s really my community. I mean, it was really the ‘Aha’ experience for me theologically, that said my faith requires this action of me in the world.... It completely was no longer only an inner personal journey but one that had to be with world events and world affairs.

For this woman, the link to community was from the beginning a global and very political one. For other women, the link to community is focused on a smaller scale, rooted in relationships and building direct connections with others, particularly those unlike themselves. The experience of activism provides a way to engage people from different walks of life: religions, races, economic backgrounds. This is an opportunity to be closer to others and also to God. As a white, politically moderate Christian woman expresses it,

For me it’s getting to know the Lord more in all the different facets and dimensions of who He is, because He expresses himself to me in our relationship. But when I have a relationship with somebody else I see other sides of Him in those people, where they’ve developed different

talents and skills that I don't possess.... So it's getting the full picture of who the Lord is by being in relationships. Because the only thing eternal on this earth are people. It's God, a relationship with him vertically, and it's the relationship that you have with others.... It's about those eternal parts, the souls.

Similarly, a white Catholic woman describes her interest in activism among people of different religions, and the opportunity to share their different perspectives while doing social justice work:

Theology is what—yeah, is what I love. And I love it because it's really a study of relationships from God, our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, our relationships with creation, all of those things so—that's what I love about it, it's all about who we are, in and through other people, and God.

Bringing faith into the community is by no means easy—many women describe it as a difficult experience, but one that helps them better understand their faith. As a white Episcopalian describes her journey,

I asked [a priest], what does it mean to keep your face turned towards Christ? And he said it means praying, and it means studying scripture, and it means living what you think you know, and community. And what wise advice, because I was doing everything that a new Christian does [laughs], I had the truth [laughs], all of it, and your world gets very narrow and you're only going to relate to Christians, and so I went through that whole thing and thank God I had that piece of advice. Because as soon as I took my truth into community it got messier, and I found out I couldn't be so loving, and I couldn't be so tolerant [laughs], I couldn't be all those things that those deep spiritual experiences give you. And so I've had to kind—I've loosened up, and yet I'm still very protective of my Christianity, I love it, and it's real and it's true and all of those for me, and now I'm going into this forum very intentionally that's inter-religious, I'm studying, I'm called toward Islam, and this was before 9/11 and everything else, it's all part of that diversity and being open to the other.... And I don't know where that's leading, because it's hard to be open and respectful and loving to a totally different tradition and meet that doctrine, because they're going to be as doctrinal as I could be, and let the doctrine rest, let the experience be the real thing, and then see what happens. But it's hard, for me, it's just going to be a very—it's going to be an interesting time [laughs].

Despite the difficulty of bringing faith to community, this link is perhaps what most closely binds the woman we interviewed together: virtually none of them could conceive of their faith without a sense of involvement in the world. Their public orientation draws them to civic and also to political life on behalf of their religious values and traditions.

The women included in our study were chosen because they are involved in some kind of activism, and so their focus on community should not be surprising. It is important, though, that the women we spoke to see involvement in their communities as central to their lives as *religious* women. Both conservative and progressive women articulate their religious values as not just a *justification* but a *mandate* for them to act in community, and they describe their work as a calling dictated for them by God.

In other words, the women we interviewed see their relationship with God as giving them the moral authority to work for change in the public sphere. They use this moral authority as a crucial resource: not only does it give them sustenance as they fight for social and political change, but it also allows them to claim public roles as political and religious activists, both historically frowned upon roles for women. Their activist work, then, involves asserting their own moral authority and agency.

“The Salt and the Light”: Images of God and Women’s Religious Activism Involving Cultural and Social Justice Issues

For conservative and progressive women alike, living out faith values comes from a sense of the importance of community and public life that drives them to seek a public role. All of the women we spoke to feel compelled to work on behalf of their religious or spiritual values in a public setting. They feel enough of a sense of moral or political agency to participate in some kind of community activism. The majority also tie this mission to politics, seeking systemic change that would better achieve their vision for their communities and the nation. Their faiths inspire them to become political and even religious activists and leaders, across faiths and political affiliations. This is a common bond.

The women in our study differ, though, once they make the leap to community. Here, they diverge in their goals, values, and theologies. The basic moral dictates common to many—that they put faith into action and bear witness to their core

The basic moral dictates common to many—that they put faith into action and bear witness to their core values—lead women in radically different directions.

values—lead women in radically different directions. In this chapter, we outline some of those differences, particularly as they are evident among women activists divided into two broad

categories: those involved in conservative political activism around cultural issues, such as reproductive rights, sex education, or gay marriage, and those active around social welfare or justice issues, mostly from a progressive but sometimes a more moderate standpoint. The chapter first describes the goals and values underlying women’s conservative cultural activism and then compares and contrasts them with the ideas underlying women’s social welfare or justice efforts. In general, the ideas expressed by conservative cultural activists are more familiar from the most visible “moral values” debates that have engaged American policymaking in recent years, while those described by social justice activists offer a less widely known way of thinking and talking about morality, moral values, and politics.

An important factor informing women’s goals and strategies as activists is how they perceive and describe their relationships with God. In general, conservative women working on cultural issues—all of whom in this sample are active in distinctly political work—describe a very personal and loving relationship with a

more intervening and judging God, who mandates that they defend moral standards to promote the cohesion and even salvation of the nation and individual sinners. Women who see their work as more concerned with social welfare or justice, on the other hand, have a more nurturing image of God, and they hope to interact with and understand better their faith and God by engaging with others. Among the women we interviewed, this approach to faith and community is lived out through activism designed either to serve the disadvantaged or, more radically, to pursue justice on their behalf. Women of color and women from the smaller U.S. religious traditions are more likely to link the need to work in community with a dedication to justice, a connection that reflects both their religious values and traditions and their experiences with oppression.

In describing their images of a nurturing and co-creative God, social justice activists challenge traditional concepts of religious authority and values. God manifests not only “masculine” traits of dominance and rule-making, but “feminine” ones of

Women of color are particularly likely to see
their faith as demanding a fight for justice.

nurture and collaboration. This image of God reflects the experiences, expectations, and values that greet and are lived by many women in the private sphere, but women social justice activists apply them to public and religious life.

In contrast, women who are more dedicated to “traditional values” and family roles—Christian conservative women—seem less likely to bring their private experiences and roles to how they think about God. Given their dedication to traditional ideas about religious moral codes and authority, this makes sense: if religious authority is male, and traditional gender roles are based on religious morality, then it would not be appropriate to think about God as female or manifesting “female” values and experiences. So, while these women are in one sense claiming their own religious authority and agency, in another they are resistant to challenging the traditional moral codes that deny women a public role of equal authority with men.

The differences between conservative cultural activists and social justice activists are wide. They point to the ways that religious women who are focused primarily on social welfare issues are reframing concepts of moral values, including ideas about responsibility, community, and public life, based on their lives and experiences as women. This chapter outlines some of the basic ideas behind the alternative visions they are advancing. It is followed in chapter 4 with more details about the religious values described by the women activists, particular working on social justice issues, who were interviewed for this project.

“THE CHAIR YOU SIT IN HAS NO MORALITY”: CONSERVATIVE WOMEN DEFEND MORAL STANDARDS

The conservative religious women we interviewed who are active on cultural issues are dedicated to improving their communities and their country: “We are supposed to be the salt and light of the community. . . . Not all the work is to be done within the walls of the church, [and] we’re supposed to make a difference, out in our communities, our neighborhoods, our state, our country.” This is clearly a call for a public role, arguing that religious people should leave the world a better place than they found it, in a way very much focused on society and even government:

I believe that government is one of the three God-ordained institutions, and I think it gets short shift. I think a lot of times the churches and pastors are afraid of what they can and can’t do, so to be on the safe side they don’t do what they can do. But we are responsible for our government and for our leaders, and we’re supposed to hold them accountable. We can’t hold them accountable unless we know what they’re doing. So we have a responsibility to vote; we have a responsibility to vote godly men and women into office.

Among the conservative women we interviewed who are working on cultural issues, these ideas are rooted in a specific goal: to reinstate a moral standard that they see as eroded in recent decades.² One woman argues, for example, that political activism is a mandate because Christian morality has given way to individualistic standards that condone what she sees as immoral behaviors:

We had a paradigm shift in the ‘60s. We went from moral absolutism to moral relativism. We haven’t gotten back yet to where I think we should be. It has to be a constant, unchanging standard by which we abide, in order to have cohesiveness in our culture, society—not to have virtual anarchy, which I think we do to some degree today, with everybody doing what is right in their own eyes, as opposed to doing what is for the betterment of each other and society as a whole. . . . I tell candidates that I talk to on a regular basis, ‘Remember this: the chair you sit in has no morality. It will take on your morality. And it’s up to you to use that opportunity if you’re elected, for good and not for gain.’

This woman ties her calling to a hope that individuals will think about the societal implications of their actions. To encourage this, she supports putting strict moral standards into law. She continues,

² It is important to remember that the interviews for this project included only a small number of conservative women (approximately seven based on our assessments), most of whom were in positions of political leadership. The following analysis is based on interviews with those conservative women who are involved in cultural issues as opposed to social welfare issues. Of course, this small group does not speak for all religious, culturally conservative activist women in the United States. Because it is a particularly political group of women, this section is mostly concerned with how they talk about their religious values and political activism, rather than their civic or service-oriented involvement.

We don't live on an island. We live in a society. And whatever I do is going to bounce off of you in some way, shape, or form. I think that every piece of legislation has someone's morality written into it. We also filter our views through some world view. Ours is a Biblical world view... When I was growing up, we knew, without it being signed or stated, that there was a governing body within society that you didn't set parameters and you didn't step outside of them. You could, but you would be ostracized. We have just splintered off, because there's no set standards that we all have to adhere to in order to be productive, operating, welcomed members of society.

The call to work in community is about holding it to a standard that will then serve to create cohesion and a better society.

For some religious conservative women, the need for strict moral standards is in turn linked to a call to work for the religious salvation of others and the country as a whole. Among the four most conservative women we spoke to, two directly spoke about this mission as a top priority. One, for example, describes her work as a battle for souls, although one that is understood in the context of winning a fight to institutionalize moral values:

There is a human face behind everything. And there's a fine line that I walk as a Christian/lobbyist/conservative Christian political person. My first obligation is to conduct myself as a Christian, so others see Christ in me, hopefully. But also, it's not a mission field per se. It's a battlefield. And I'm battling for issues, keeping in mind that there's a soul hanging in the balance.

This balance, for her, can be difficult to achieve, and even emotionally wrenching when the larger battle involves contact with the individuals she hopes to save. For example, in working on legislation to ban gay marriage, she describes the conflict she feels:

I had every emotion and it was very mercurial. One day I was very sad—a whole group of teenagers were lobbying against [legislation to ban gay marriage]. And it just struck grief into my inner being.... There was one [teenager], his mother was there with him, and his lover, and she was saying, 'How can you deny my son the right to marry who he loves?' It really grieved me. I wept privately.

Another woman is explicit about her hope for national salvation, although her perspective is somewhat more fatalistic:

If we can save a nation, great, if not, we already know how it ends, and we win.... I'm inspired by the story of Nineveh in the Bible. Jonah did not want to go into Nineveh and tell the people to repent or they were going to be destroyed, and of course you know the story, he got swallowed by the whale. But he finally got there and he delivered the message, and Nineveh turned, and for a hundred years that nation obeyed God again.

And I have hope for America, that if the message goes forth that, yes, we're here, just maybe it will turn around. And so I try not to lose sight of the fact, that even though I'm in a war fighting it, it's already over, I know that ending down there, but along the way you could touch lives and help people develop their potential, that they really were destined to become.... God's people were supposed to be involved in the public arena, not just sitting on a pew, and... it's not that we don't include the saving of souls in what we do, you know.

This woman sees her work as almost futile: the outcome is already preordained by God. But for her, the journey is almost as important because of the potential to empower and save individuals as it is to win a national battle. Still, she frames her fight in those larger terms. She also sees a failure to fight the broader battle as a

**"God's people were supposed to be involved in
the public arena, not just sitting on a pew."**

failure of churches, which are more focused on individual worship and salvation:

This is why I believe America's in the shape it's in: too many people have gotten involved in every organization at the church, they're at the church every night of the week, and we've got a world out there going to hell, where all the light bulbs are stuck in one building. We are the light of the world, we are the salt of the earth, and a lot of believers don't want to be the salt.... That part is lost in American Christianity, and we had a whole nation that is going to hell, and the fault—is it the politicians? No. According to the Word of God, it's the church's fault.

This woman's frustration with her church's failure to be more politically active may not be unusual. About half of all evangelical Christians say they would like to see their denomination do more to affect policy in Washington, and more than half say the same thing about state politics. Frustration, given this hope, may be warranted, since evangelical Christians are less likely to participate in political activities than mainline Protestants, and about as likely as Black Christians and Catholics, with slightly less than half doing so. Evangelical Christians are also about as likely as other groups to hear sermons or discussions about social and political issues in their congregations (Wuthnow 2002; also Campbell 2004). Their congregations are more likely to pass out voter guides than other denominations', but they are less likely to invite candidates to speak or protest policies (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003). As a community, then, the political dedication of evangelicals is mixed, a source of frustration for those who would like to see a greater emphasis on politics. In part, this seems to be related to tensions over how to bring America back to Christian moral standards and accountability—some evangelicals see politics as an important way to do so, while others are more focused on individual conversion (Manning 1999). Either way, though, evangelicals are interested in bringing Christian values to all of their country, a desire reflected by the women we interviewed.

In part, the emphasis on salvation and strict moral standards among the conservative cultural activists we interviewed seems related to their images of and relationships with God, which can be understood within the theology and history of American evangelical Christianity. As chapter 2 noted, American images of God are more personal and have a greater sense that God intervenes in the world—and individual lives—than those of many other countries. American images are also of a God that is more punitive and judgmental (Froese and Bader 2005). That said, there

"My faith says that that struggle is what makes us human, and what makes us good human beings, and what makes us, what builds character, and what gives us integrity, what gives us authenticity."

is considerable variation within American images of God, with some believing in a God that is more judgmental and involved in world events, and some believing in a less condemning

or actively intervening image. These conceptions are linked to our political beliefs. Generally, Americans with more judging and actively involved images of God are more politically conservative on social issues than those with more abstracted, less involved images. Those with a more intervening image are also more likely to be affiliated with the Republican than the Democratic party (Bader and Froese 2005).

Our findings fit these patterns. The women we interviewed who are conservative and active on cultural issues articulate a consistently more judgmental concept of God than other women. All of these women describe an active and interceding God. Most describe this image of God as essential for them to have meaning and confidence in their lives. As one says,

Unless you believe in a Supreme Being who has control of things, and has your best interests at heart, then how do you handle the uncertainty of life? And how do you handle the decisions that you have to make in the midst of that uncertainty? Because there's no way you can know the future. So unless you believe that God is someone who's omnipotent, who knows the future, and who loves you and has your best—who is working constantly in the background of your life to make that best come out for you, then how do you function? It's just throwing darts at a dartboard with a blindfold on, and hoping that something will strike out there. Well, my faith says that God is a very personal God, that Jesus died for my sins, and that Jesus is very involved in interceding for me with God, and that I can pray and have influence on what God is doing.

The God described here is very involved in individual lives—an active and meaningful presence. In fact, for this woman, faith and trust in a personal and active God is the only way to receive real meaning and peace in life, by surrendering her personal need for control:

Our faith says that you say to God, help me to bend my knee and surrender to whatever You say is best, because I know whatever You have in store for me will be the best. And that takes a struggle, and I think my

faith says that that struggle is what makes us human, and what makes us good human beings, and what makes us, what builds character, and what gives us integrity, what gives us authenticity.... The [people] who are real, I believe, are the ones who say, 'I know God is in control. My job as a human being is to surrender to that control, and that's not an easy thing to do because I want it to go the way I want it to go' [laughs].

Another conservative women calls for the same kind of surrender to God's will: "Generally speaking, if you have the inclination to trust and to wait, He will open the right door. And I've tried to push some open myself and it's been a mistake." Another notes that surrendering in this way is a source of strength, rooted in knowing that her own traits aren't all there is to rely on: "That's why I'm confident, because I rest assured that when I show up and surrender myself to God, that He uses me, and I don't have to have confidence in [myself], but I have confidence in Him as His messenger." For all these women, God's guidance and intervention are key to their lives; as individuals, they make their own choices, but they are nudged, used, and rewarded by God within His larger plan.

The faith described by conservative cultural activists is also crucial, in their views, to winning God's help and support. One, for example, describes a series of events that she saw as guided by God to determine the course of her life; she concludes her story by stating that "God worked a miracle, because we were desperate, and because He loves us, and because we had been faithful." Her words are echoed by others, suggesting that faith itself is a key to winning God's favor, which in turn leads to reaping good things in life.

In connecting faith, obedience and surrender to God to good fortune, and thus to a need to institutionalize moral values, conservative evangelicals reflect aspects of the history of their religious traditions. Modern evangelicalism is rooted in a set of traditions in which moral discipline is a sign of being among the elect, those chosen by God for salvation, and where good behavior flows from strong Christian values. Moral accountability is key to this tradition and remains central to modern evangelicalism. The perceived softening of this approach among mainline Protestants also contributes to a sense that evangelicals alone preserve basic American Christian values. Many evangelicals see returning America to a stronger sense of moral accountability as returning it to its most important roots—the reason for U.S. prosperity and power (Bendroth 1993; Manning 1999). Their belief in a set of moral absolutes is underscored by faith in a literal and divinely written scripture that lays out the Christian moral code (Bendroth 1993).

In this context, for some evangelicals writing traditional Christian morals into law is a way to demand that individuals and the nation live out the morals and Christian values that will bring not only social cohesion and stability but, potentially, God's favor and prosperity. In contrast, defying God's standards will lead to personal and community decline. As a result, pursuing personal and national salvation is critical to economic and social security; it is a very public and political goal. Thus, conservative attention to a variety of social and cultural issues, such as gay marriage, abortion and

contraception, and prayer in schools, is seen as contributing in a fundamental way to the well-being of U.S. politics and society.

For conservative evangelical women, it is also important that traditional, and scriptural, Christian moral codes lay out gender roles that exclude women from public agency and authority, while placing men as the “rulers” of their households, living out their religious and moral authority in family life. Many contemporary evangelical

Conservative women activists are taking a radical step, by claiming moral agency.

Christians, both men and women, remain dedicated to these traditional family roles, even when for practical reasons they diverge from them—e.g., when women work outside the home (Gallagher and Smith 1999).

The commitment to honoring those roles is a way for women (and men) to gain and keep God’s favor, by honoring His will as articulated in traditional moral codes.

Given the importance of traditional morality among Christian evangelical women, it makes sense that when they take on public roles—thus challenging certain aspects of religious limitations on their moral agency—they would do so in support of moral standards being institutionalized in law, and would be primarily concerned with so-called cultural issues. The conservative cultural activists interviewed believe strongly in the need to contribute to U.S. politics in this way, as conservatives, as Christians, and as women, and in almost every case, they argued that Christian women have a specific obligation in the contemporary United States to work on behalf of cultural issues, because so many of those issues are seen as affecting the well-being of families and children in particular. Several specifically argued that they follow the models of women in scripture who claimed moral authority, particularly when men did not sufficiently take leadership on important moral issues. In this sense, they are taking a radical step, by claiming moral agency.

At the same time, by dedicating their activism to upholding traditional moral codes, these women do not comprehensively challenge the institutions that ultimately limit their moral and public agency. This makes sense given what they see at stake if traditional morality is not protected and enforced. It also gives credibility and urgency to their activism as women, since it is in service to traditional values and ultimately, in their view, their families. Finally, it flows well from their images of God as a masculine and judging, if benevolent, patriarch. Based on that image, and the idea of the religious authority that flows from it as male, these women are committed to traditional morality that assigns certain values and experiences (as well as women) to private life.

Women engaged in social justice or welfare issues also claim a kind of moral agency, and at times it is rooted in a set of values and experiences linked to their traditional roles. Their approach to bringing faith into community, though, is very different, centered on a relationship with God who is nurturing and most often known through relationships with others. This idea reflects a perception and

interpretation of women's roles in the private sphere as relevant to religious values and authority and to public life. The next section describes the approaches and perspectives of these women and how they differ from those of women working as cultural conservative activists.

"IN COMMUNITY YOU EXPERIENCE GOD": RELIGIOUS WOMEN WORK FOR SOCIAL WELFARE

The women we interviewed who are activists around issues of social justice and welfare—the majority of those in the study—also see faith as compelling them to take on a public role. As one woman, an African American minister, notes, “It is our responsibility... to always be vigilant, watching and looking and checking up on those human beings who’ve assumed power, or who have been given power over us. Because they are flawed, and they are apt to make huge mistakes about our lives and even their own.”

These sentiments in some ways echo those of conservative women who work on cultural issues, particularly in their hope

“My faith says that you go to church because you are in communion with a group of people, with a community. And it’s only when you are in community that you experience the presence of God.”

to ensure that their values are reflected in public debate and policy. At the same time, the importance of moving faith into community is often articulated very differently by women working on social welfare issues—some of whom see themselves as fairly conservative or moderate, but most of whom (over 95 percent in our sample) are more progressive in their political attitudes.

The Goal of Working in Community: Engaging a Cooperative and Nurturing God in Relationships with Others

The sense of why community is important, and what it means to living out a woman's faith, is very different among women active in social welfare issues than it is among women cultural conservatives. For many of these activists, community is not just a place to promote their values, or a place they must work to ensure personal or national salvation. As was noted in the previous chapter, it is also a place for many women to know God through their relationships with others. In fact, the very process of public engagement is itself a goal and benefit that religious social justice activists talk about repeatedly. Listen, for example, to a Latina Catholic:

Moses was not a private person, nor was Christ.... They were very public people. They were very political people, and they were doing work in the world.... I think there's been a long-term effort to privatize religion so that when you go to church, it's really about your own personal relationship with God. And my faith says that you go to church because you are in communion with a group of people, with a community. And it's only when

you are in community that you experience the presence of God. And so, you know, I often say to people in training, ‘If you really are on a search for God, then you need to sit eyeball-to-eyeball with another person, and you will encounter God. But if you’re unwilling to relate to other human beings, you’re never going to find what you’re hunting for in terms of a relationship with God.’ And so, my faith says, and my interpretation of scripture, is that it’s the communal existence that creates the presence of God.

Women social justice activists repeatedly use this kind of imagery, using words such as “relationship,” “friendship,” “connections,” and describing interactions with others—especially those who are different from them—as a central way to build their relationships with God.

The idea of community as a way to know God draws us back to the question of how diverse images of God and other religious differences shape the goals and strategies of activists. In general, religious women involved in social justice issues are less likely to describe a God who intervenes directly or sits in judgment of individuals or society; instead, they describe a relationship with God that more closely resembles a nurturing and even co-creative partnership than a master and servant. For example, from a Latina Catholic:

I really believe the religious values—that it’s because we believe in a God that is so good to be able to do any of these things, and then we are called to participate in systemic change because of our creation. Creation wasn’t always what we have now. And creation takes place every day, and we can see it, mostly in nature, which we are destroying by our lack of concern for the world or lack of concern for the ecology at present.

Here, God is certainly a profound and empowering element of life, but people are in partnership with God in constant creation. This is a very different image from the idea of surrendering to God’s will articulated by the conservative activists working on cultural issues.

Some women social justice activists also describe an intervening image of God. As noted in the previous chapter, many feel a very individual calling to some kind of activism, and some have become aware of this calling as a visceral and direct form of communication, also sure of God’s presence guiding their life choices and decisions. This individual relationship with God is described with phrases such as “God opened a door for me,” or “God intended me to be here,” or “We were brought to do this work.” Certainly, the epiphanies described by some social justice activists also contain an image of an intensely personal and tangible relationship with God. Still, even the women using these descriptions evoke less of a sense of surrender to God’s will, instead talking about a more gentle kind of nudging and joint sense of journey. God’s positive intervention is also not described as a reward for their faith, but rather as an ongoing journey together.

One woman, herself fairly conservative, notes that her relationship with God is a source of strength and meaning for her service work:

There is a weariness—the Bible says to not become weary in doing good, and you do get weary. And it's like, what do I have to do now? And that means that you've reduced it to a job. You're not really going in the strength of the Holy Spirit, which is Him doing the work for you. You're doing it in your own self-effort, your own strength. And your own resources become tapped very quickly, you know. And so it's calling upon the Lord I guess, and being in relationship with Him and being His hands and his feet, letting Him be the one to do this for these people because that's what He wants to do, but you're the vessel. And so for me, I'm in alignment with Him and I'm cooperating with Him, and we're partnering together for this one individual, all these people, the organization as a whole, for the least of the brethren, for that last person in line in the homeless program, or that last person that's on the waiting list that's just waiting for a bed in our recovery program.

This woman evokes some of the same imagery as the conservative cultural activists interviewed, particularly in feeling like a “vessel” through which God works. At the same time, she describes her relationship with God as a collaboration tied very clearly to working on behalf of others in community, rather than as a surrendering. She plainly links her relationship to God with a mandate to work for the disadvantaged.

Women social justice activists also talk about salvation in a different way than conservative cultural activists. An Episcopalian woman, for example, argues that pursuing justice and protecting the vulnerable are mandated by God, but she does not pursue them for personal salvation:

You should be looking for opportunities in your life to do these things that God appreciates. Just maybe for the really simple reason that God appreciates it. This is what God wants us to do... And, for me, it's not a question of getting to heaven by pleasing God, it's just some impulse that I have that, at my stage of life, I have the time and the wherewithal to do some of these things and to encourage other people to do them.

This approach is a good example of Episcopalian theology claiming that good works do not bring about salvation but do spring naturally and necessarily from real and active faith in Christ. This idea is, of course, related to the evangelical argument that good behavior is evidence of being among the elect, but in a way that suggests a less judging God: here, a woman of faith wants to do something that God *appreciates*, not something God *demand*s, and her emphasis is on serving others rather than living out a strict moral code. This is a much softer articulation than many types of evangelicalism assert.

Another woman, a white Catholic whose daughter has converted to conservative evangelical Christianity, is suspicious of the idea of spreading faith and salvation. She sees her activism as potentially inspiring others to build their relationships with God, but only as an inadvertent side effect:

[My daughter] went to China a couple of years ago for the summer, and her role was giving Bibles out. And I guess I've always come from, 'Help, jump in, we can lead by our example.' And her work is working with the Bible and teaching Christian values. And I've hit a wall with that because I just don't agree with that. I just do not feel like— Maybe it's just me personally. I feel like God wants me out there helping others, and hopefully good things will happen to them along the way, and they'll find their relationship with God, but that's not my purpose.

For this woman, the concept of actively working to convert others, and thus to save souls, is problematic; her real focus is on serving and bettering the welfare of others. Still, she does see the value of indirectly inspiring others to pursue their relationships with God.

Even when women social justice activists are interested in spreading their religious values more directly, they articulate it in different terms. A Sikh, for example, speaks of spreading her spiritual practices as a way to improve politics and society as a whole:

I don't want other people to be [of my religion], I don't care. I want people to be people of consciousness, people of righteousness, people of integrity.... What I would love to do, if I had my druthers—the way I would like to impact politics is to teach yoga and meditation. I'd like to teach the Supreme Court, I'd like to teach at the White House, and that would impact it. It's awakening people in a way. Not that I'm going to change their views, but I think that the concept of knowing yourself, and being comfortable with who you are and how you live your life, is something that yoga and meditation can help you with, and is a very advantageous piece in the political arena. And that kind of awareness would change the political arena enormously.

Of course, like the more conservative women quoted above, this woman is interested in spreading her basic values to effect change. In that sense, she, too, sees a kind of community salvation at stake. At the same time, the importance of these values is not linked to a sense that they will result in personal religious salvation or approval from God. Instead, for her they will result in spreading a sense of peace and connectedness—a theme we return to in chapter 4.

On the whole, the relationship with God described by women social justice activists is less judging and hierarchical. God is not intervening to punish or reward behavior, but is in a cooperative journey together with women throughout their lives. The relationship is constantly changing and is more reflective of the context of society and its social currents.

It would be wrong, though, to say that women social justice activists do not experience a deeply personal relationship with God. Like conservative cultural activists, they describe God as giving meaning and direction to their individual lives, and they see God as prescribing certain ethical mandates to them and to society. God is perhaps more of a nurturer, a friend, and a guide than a judge, a supervisor, or a leader, but the relationship is still very close and profound, more than an abstract

concept operating in the background of women's lives. As a Hindu woman describes her relationship with the goddess she worships, "I see her as a universal mother. Whoever I am, whatever I'm going to become, a mother will accept you for who you are. So that's what I saw in her, and I said okay, this is who I will pray to."

It would also be a mistake to say that women social justice activists do not feel accountable to living in an ethical way that is prescribed by God; even as a friend or partner, God is not completely devoid of passing judgment. A white Catholic, for example, describes her own sense of accountability as central to her relationship with Christ:

I always took seriously, feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, bury the dead, instruct the ignorant.... When I die, when Matthew says, 'Lord, when did we see you homeless and hungry?'... Jesus was going to say, 'Where in the hell were you?' That's the question I have to answer. 'Where in the hell [was I]?'

This woman describes a sense of accountability for her actions that is not that different from her conservative counterparts'. In part, her view reflects the particular teachings of Catholicism; like Episcopalians, Catholics believe that good works flow from true faith. In fact, for Catholics, faith is meaningless without good works, and

"We as individual citizens have a responsibility to make sure that we are treating our neighbor in a way that's humane and decent."

so professed faith is not sufficient for salvation (e.g., Feister 2005). The contemporary Catholic Church has built on these ideas to demand that its members work for social justice, particularly on behalf of the poor. Many of the Church's social teachings also obligate Catholics to address not only their personal sin, but the structural aspects of sin, by working for systemic change (Hogan 2003; U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 1986). In a more general sense, though, this woman reflects an emphasis on social responsibility that is common to women social justice activists across religions.

This brings us to another way that women social justice activists talk very differently about their goals in working in community: there is a clear emphasis on social context and the importance of addressing social and material injustice as a primary religious goal. The women interviewed see this work as fundamental to allowing individuals to live to their full potential, without material difficulties or social inequalities getting in the way. As an African American minister states,

I think that all of us have a responsibility to society to make sure that everyone in society has the opportunity for well-being, for being able to exist in a humane and decent way. We as individual citizens have a responsibility to make sure that we are treating our neighbor in a way that's humane and decent. Government has a responsibility for making sure that human beings can exist in the societies that they govern in a decent and

humane way. And corporations should have that same requirement but they've been let off the hook. And so, there's a moral imperative in that and that is what draws me to faith, not so much religion, but faith.

The sense of responsibility described by this woman evokes the same image of growth, cooperation, and self-knowledge that is evident in how women social justice activists talk about God. They seek to provide the conditions that will allow others to find real opportunity, choice, and free will in life, so that they can then live up to the potential given them by God. This includes, in a sense, the ability to find their own nurturing and cooperative relationships with God without letting earthly inequalities get in the way. It also includes the ability to rely on one's own moral agency.

It is perhaps not surprising that women who have an image of God that is less judgmental and intervening, and more in partnership with humans, would see both activism and faith as rooted in community and shared responsibility. If God is truly in partnership and cooperation with individuals, then finding ways to partner and

The women we interviewed are reinterpreting the values of women's private lives as imminently and powerfully public, in both politics and religion.

cooperate with others—i.e., to live in community—would seem like a logical place to find and know God. It is also not surprising that women who see their relationships with God as cooperative would be

more tolerant of a greater range of personal choices and behavior. At the very least, these women do not argue that either individual salvation or national prosperity is dependent on following strict, traditional moral standards. As a result, they do not see a need to put those standards into law.

But women social justice and welfare activists who seek to apply values of cooperation and mutuality to their images of God and activist life differ from conservative cultural activists in another way: they are more deeply challenging traditional concepts of religious authority and values. By basing their images of God on values such as nurturing and collaboration, women are arguing that values from private life are relevant to religious authority. By focusing their activism on ideas like relationship and community, they argue that those values are relevant to public life. As chapter 1 argued, these values are rooted in women's experience in the private sphere, but are often subsumed in public life by values based more on rights and freedoms and competition. In religion, such masculine values are deified not only in images of God as judge and rule-maker, but in moral codes that grant only men religious authority. The women we interviewed, though, are reinterpreting the values of women's private lives as imminently and powerfully public, in both politics and religion.

Strategies for Engaging Others in Community: Helping the Neediest and Working for Justice

Religious women activists describe their social welfare and justice goals in more and less radical and/or political ways. The simpler and less radical approach is described as a fairly straightforward need to serve those in need. Women engage others, particularly the disadvantaged and those unlike them, by working in service to improve the social welfare of dispossessed communities. As an African American Christian says, “Basically, we are helping people, helping people and not looking for anything in return. Just to help them to make their lives better, being selfless, and just being there for them, a beacon.” Similarly, a white Catholic: “I feel like Jesus wanted us to help the poor and the helpless and I really believe in that.”

A white Muslim, who works for women’s rights, spoke in similar terms: “Religions are there to protect the weakest, and the most vulnerable in the community. And that’s always women and children. It’s always women and children.”

A white mainline Protestant echoes these ideas: “I think as Christians, we’re called to help the least, the last, and the lost. These people that we work with on a daily basis have had really tough lives, and they need somebody to be compassionate, and someone to extend them resources, and just to be a friend or to be a support to them. So while I get paid for what I do, I feel like it is a service, and it is something that is directly in line with my beliefs about how Christ wants us to help the world.”

Other women take a more directly political and systemic approach to the idea of engaging God in community, one that is more radically dedicated to the idea of justice. As a white mainline Protestant says,

I saw that churches were and should be involved in charitable activity, taking care of people who can’t take care of themselves and standing up for social justice, making it unnecessary to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves because these systemic problems are improved.... But I think, also, there’s a deeper element to it that I can’t explain by events or circumstances, and that is that the message of the gospels has to do with giving of what we have, taking care of people who don’t have, distributing our abundance. And that it’s imperative for Christians to be—and Jews, also, to be—to have part of their life be not exchanging goods for what we can get in return, but just giving back what God has given us. So I think that it’s—there’s certainly roots in culture and family, but there’s also this sense I have that this is the work that we’re called to do.

This woman draws an explicit link to building systemic change, suggesting that service to the weak and vulnerable should involve working to create social, political, and economic systems that alleviate inequality and allow individuals to achieve a

standard of well-being by removing barriers. She exemplifies the more radical way that many women work to engage others, God, and their faith in community: by working for justice and liberation. Engaging a nurturing and collaborative God means working for systemic change.

Interestingly, although this concept of service is perhaps the more radical version, it was also more commonly evoked by the women interviewed. In other words, despite the challenge it poses for religious men and women, the idea that faith

A dedication to engaging God by engaging others and the community goes beyond simply serving social welfare to an emphasis on justice.

demands working for justice was expressed by more women than the simpler ideas of helping others or serving the most vulnerable. This idea spanned differences in

race and religion and, as discussed below, was even more common among women of color and non-Christians than among white Christians, although many white Christian women expressed it as well.

An African American Christian eloquently sums up her focus on justice, linking her religious values to oppression:

If I'm following or modeling my life on this Jesus, if I really do believe in these texts, then I have to at least try to synthesize them into an ethic that informs my life. And the ethic that I've derived from those scriptures is that we don't tolerate oppression, and we do engage people who are often denigrated and cast aside and ostracized from communities. I do believe we have a special duty to children because that has been what those scriptures have taught me. I think that of course within those scriptures, within those narratives, there are terrible stories of abuse of women, abuse of children, abuse of the poor, and abuse of cultural and ethnic minorities—just that kind of ethnophobia, fear of difference. I see all of that in those texts. I draw from those stories lessons about what we do to overcome that type of oppression.

A Black Quaker uses similar language and imagery:

If I say that I am an observant daughter of God, and I strive to live that in my life daily, it doesn't just mean that I'm polite to people who cut my grass, but it also means that I'm going to think strategically about how I'm going to work to make this a better world. I'm going to think strategically around opposing oppression, and I'm going to think and act strategically around how I support others who are in this work.

An Arab American Muslim echoes both:

I don't see spiritual and political—all of those are all blended, because the requirements of us as Muslims in terms of fighting against oppression, being just and honest in our dealings and so forth, permeates every aspect of our life. So every day is a faith-oriented day, as opposed to just looking

at rituals and prayer and fasting and then looking at your life. They're completely blended into one. So that shapes everything we do.

A white mainline Protestant also evokes ideas of justice:

I met a woman who...has just an unquestioning kind of understanding of what it is that's expected of her as a Christian in terms of the poor and the marginalized and those people treated unjustly. And she's such a force that she really influenced me a lot. She said, 'Well, I don't know why all these nice Episcopalians are so nervous about the poor. Of course, it's our job, you know. It's our job to look after people. It's our job to be in the world after the worship is done.'

A white Jew sees a commitment to justice in her religious tradition:

I am very drawn to the prophetic values.... Our work is driven by our values, that teach us in the spirit of Maimonides to help people help themselves to create a just world, to let righteousness flow as waters, and justice as a mighty stream, and that enables us to have clarity.... We bring a certain clarity and morality, if you will, values, when we come.

An African American Christian sees the challenge of justice as difficult but necessary to an authentic faith:

I love that it's the most authentic way to live out my faith. What I mean by that is that it challenges you. People say I care about the world, okay, I care about injustice. It's so easy to open a soup kitchen. It's a lot harder to fight, and to question why is there no money, and to try to change the policies that deal with it, to come up against real hard core—Our society is so polarized in terms of race and class. If we live out our faith in an authentic way, we have to deal with it, we can't pretend that it doesn't exist, but most of us go in and out of beautiful sanctuaries and never deal with that reality. And that's what I say by, it's the most authentic way to live out my faith—because I can't run from it.

An Asian American Buddhist also sees justice as crucial to her religious values:

Things that exist, like the racism and the prejudice and the deprivation, the inequality that exists. The world is not aware of all this stuff but we see it here and—so I feel like it's something that we have to take care of.... There is a line in the Golden Chain that says, 'I'm a link in the Buddhist Golden Chain of love that stretches around the world. I must keep my link bright and strong and protect all who are weaker than myself. I will try to say the word, beautiful words, to do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends my happiness and misery. May every link in the Buddhist Golden Chain of Love become bright and strong and may we all attain perfect peace.'

For all these women, a dedication to engaging God by engaging others and the community goes beyond simply serving social welfare to an emphasis on justice.

Their ideas also suggest an understanding of shared responsibility that fits well with the concept of God that many of these women describe: as nurturing, co-creative, and collaborative, but also as demanding accountability.

The Weight of History: Faith, Justice, and the Activism of African American, Jewish, and Muslim Women

Many of the women who linked faith and service with justice in our interviews are not white Christians. Certainly, many of the white Christian women we spoke to were concerned with oppression and systemic change, but as a group they were not as expressive of those ideas; instead, they were more likely to talk about helping others or serving the most vulnerable in less radical ways. In contrast, women from

Women from racial, ethnic, and religious minorities more consistently draw explicit connections between faith and justice.

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The focus on justice by women from less dominant backgrounds is perhaps not surprising, in part based on their own experiences with oppression and disadvantage, and in part because of the activist histories of many of their denominations. Among the African Americans interviewed, for example, an interest in working for justice as a religious mandate comes in part from a history of activism in traditionally Black Christian churches. These denominations and congregations have been vocally and visibly committed to social justice issues, particularly civil and economic rights, and they have actively applied scripture to social conditions and liberating the poor and oppressed (e.g., Harris 2001; Williams 2002). African American Protestants report hearing sermons or group discussions at church about issues such as government policies toward the poor, growing economic inequality, improving black-white relations, and corporate social responsibility at rates much higher than people from most other denominations, except Jews—another minority with a history of oppression and discrimination (Wuthnow 2002). In fact, almost two-thirds of African Americans report hearing clergy or other church leadership talk about the need for people to be politically involved, and almost half have seen a national or local leader speak at a regular service (Harris 2001). Historically Black churches also put much higher priority than others on advocacy or community organizing around social issues (Dudley and Roozen 2001).

The theology of African American Christian churches is key to this focus. Black churches were important to the development of the 19th-century idea of the social gospel, in particular bringing a focus on racial justice often ignored by whites, and they also subscribed to the idea of helping people fulfill their God-given potential by eliminating social and economic obstacles to doing so (Edwards and Gifford 2003). African American women, particularly in the Baptist Church, helped drive this emphasis (Higginbotham 1993). The focus on justice continued during the civil

rights movement and beyond, when religious leaders in the Black church and civil rights leaders used religious imagery and interpreted Gospel passages as mandates for liberating the oppressed and poor (Williams 2002). In this vein, an African American woman minister sums up how she talks about justice and religion:

All through the scriptures, it says plead for the fatherless, cover the widow... There's a scripture in Isaiah where it talks about how we're living in darkness, and we're looking for light, security, and we lean against the wall and the wall falls, and all this has happened to us because, basically, we had not stood up for justice. Truth is lying in the street. Justice is turned around backwards. And there was nobody that had a voice. And it says all those things happen to us when we don't speak up, when we become silent about things that are important—we get all kinds of byproducts from that and, a lot of times, it means that we ourselves get consumed in darkness, because we won't say anything about the darkness that's swelling up around us.

Most of the African American women we interviewed were used to thinking about justice issues as integral to their religious values and traditions. Another woman, the daughter of a minister and a minister herself, also sums up the justice orientation of her tradition eloquently:

My cultural tradition, and my particular denominational tradition, comes out of the experiences of an oppressed people: African people who were enslaved, who were fighting their way out of enslavement, whose children's children, daughters, mothers, fathers had been viciously killed and treated for centuries, and whose homeland was raped and pillaged. And so perhaps the reason that I view the scriptures from the perspective of the oppressed people in those scriptures is because my cultural tradition is of an oppressed people. So whether it's the folks whose land was taken in the Bible [laughs], or whether it's the kids, the children, the sick, the so-called demon possessed, I'm still looking at it from that perspective—because my tradition is of the people who were in a larger Methodist tradition, who were not allowed to worship with their white counterparts, who were required to stay segregated and subjugated, were not allowed to come to the altar and pray. And when they did they were physically removed. And from the time that that happened, this larger movement of really understanding the scriptures to require liberation, and to require justice and self-determination or self-empowerment, all of that stays with me now.

Another woman describes how this philosophy and African American history live in the activism of church members and their families:

Both my parents are Southerners. One's from Georgia and one's from Mississippi. They both grew up in a time where civil rights was a big issue for African Americans, and the experience for both of them was that their

individual churches were where they went for both spiritual support and for support around social justice issues—and that’s where the leadership was concentrated, was in that the preachers were also the people on the front lines politically. And so I’ve grown up with parents who are very active in the civil rights movement, and primarily through their involvement in church. And so we were always taught that part of what is expected of us as people of faith, from God and from my church, is that we find a way to marry the concepts of charity and justice.

In all of these cases, church support for civil rights and social justice became part of the very being of African American women as people of faith and as activists, as a consequence of a history of religious activism that continues today.

The Jewish women interviewed also expressed a devotion to living faith by working for justice, tied very much to their understandings of God and scripture. When asked whether she feels an obligation to act on behalf of justice, a rabbi answers this way:

Is it because I really think there’s a supernatural God who’s dictating this law that God wants to be followed? No. Do I think that the weight of history creates obligation? If you ask me at certain point, I’ll say that’s my answer. Other times I’ll say that... God is in the space between human beings, and all these ethical commandments and ritual commandments are all bound up together, and any relationship that you have with God, any relationship with human beings are tied together.

For this woman, history and theology combine to mandate that she work for justice. Another Jewish woman echoes her thoughts on the importance of her Jewish values:

Our mission is around what is driven by the Jewish prophetic values of justice, and so if the public housing residents come to us and say we’re being driven out of our home, we need your help in organizing, we don’t look at it as is this issue winnable—which is often an organizing criteria when some groups decide if they’re going to get involved—we look at it as is this a just struggle, and if it’s a just struggle, winnable or not, we’re going to get into it.

The importance of justice is evident not only in the religious values and traditions of Judaism, but in the ways that it is often stressed in worship and in a history of social justice activism among Jews. Like African Americans, Jews are more likely than most Americans to hear messages related to justice in their congregations (Wuthnow 2002). This message is steeped in the Jewish tradition of *tzedakah*, or righteous giving, which compels Jews to work for justice on behalf of God as a way to create a more perfect world (e.g., Kliksberg 2003). Based in part on this tradition, American Jews have an active history of work in social justice movements, including the civil rights movement (e.g., Schultz 2001). Jews also have a specific experience with discrimination and oppression, nationally and globally, that informs this tradition

(Breger 2003). In other words, like African Americans, Jews combine a theology and lived experience that encourages a focus on justice as a deeply religious value.

Muslim women express a similar commitment to justice based on their faith, in part also inspired by their experience as a religious minority. For example, from an Arab American Muslim:

If there are social injustices, then we're obligated to make changes. I started looking at the Koran as speaking to me directly. Rather than something that should be learned and memorized and understood, it now is something that is a living document that is giving examples, that is telling us, this is how you treat your neighbors, this is how you treat your parents, this is why, this is your obligation in life. If you do see an injustice, you're obligated to speak out. And that is jihad to me.... There are verses in the Koran that mandate that we get involved, and that mandate that we speak out, and that's our jihad.

These ideas are repeated by a white Muslim:

I think what I've learned more than anything, is you have to speak up about injustice, regardless of who it is... and not just because you want to be a good person, but because your religion tells you that you have to. If there's injustice, then you have to speak up against it.... I really make an effort in Ramadan to try to read [the Koran] cover to cover. I think that it refocuses—often, I'll just be struck by how many times the word justice, and speaking out against injustice, and defending those who are unable to defend themselves. But all these kinds of social activism and justice are mentioned in the Koran over and over and over and over again. And it's like, how can you read this and not think that it is?

For these women, working for liberation and justice is a central religious value, supported by the text and traditions of Islam. As the women above do, many Muslims see an obligation in Islam to work for peace and justice that involves fighting to end oppression and minimizing inequality, interpreted by some as a real meaning of jihad or a mandate stemming from the existence of the divine on earth (e.g., Engineer 2001; Sonn 1996; Zaman 1996).

For the Muslim women we interviewed, this mandate is reinforced by the sense of oppression they feel as a minority group. As chapter 2 noted, for many Muslim women it has become increasingly important to speak out as Islamic Americans in the period since 9/11. For them, this activism on behalf of their own community is a way to work for justice:

The things that struck me so much were the Koran saying very clearly to me, and the Prophet saying very clearly to me, where you live and your community are your responsibility, and it just kept striking me. Literally, the land that you live in, you are responsible for it, which if you keep reading about what the Prophet was saying, he was saying the trees, he was talking about literally the land, but also about your neighbors. And I

realized if this is where I live and this is who I am as an American, and if I can't go anywhere else, then I have a religious obligation towards this land. When those things clicked in that way, it was like I don't have a choice but to do something about what's around me. I mean, it sounds profound but it was so intrinsic, and so just kind of eye-opening for me, and then I realized that as a Muslim I have an obligation.

In this sense, Muslim women follow in the footsteps of African Americans and American Jews in working from a history of oppression to understand the relationship between their faith and justice. In fact, an Arab American woman describes a growing awareness of the connections with other disadvantaged groups in the United States by an activist colleague:

It's evolving now, but I talked to this one woman, and she's of Arab descent, and she said, 'They always told me how African Americans went through a lot of difficult times and I would always dismiss it.' Not that she's belittling it, but she said, 'I never connected with that. But now,' she said, 'I really understand what the Civil Rights movement is about.' So, to have somebody get to that point of understanding it, in such an integral and intrinsic way, it's phenomenal.

This final quote, like many preceding it, points to an underlying theme in how religious women working as social justice activists, particularly from nondominant religious and racial backgrounds, talk about justice and inequality. Their work is closely tied to the idea of community and—as discussed in the next chapter—interconnectedness. For the Muslim woman quoted above, there is a realization that any fight for dignity and rights benefits other disadvantaged communities. Women throughout this chapter who evoke the idea of justice allude to it in other ways: if we do not fight for justice, we all live in darkness; our relationships with God and each other are all tied up together; where you live and your community are your responsibility. When these ideas are explicitly tied to justice, it becomes clear that women see a sense of shared responsibility and shared welfare.

For women from racial, ethnic, and religious minority backgrounds, the sense of shared responsibility and welfare may be more obvious than it is for women from less disadvantaged backgrounds, simply because it is clearer, based on their personal and group histories, how oppression and injustice affect daily life, access to resources, and the health of their communities. As a result, the orientation toward justice and community may be a connection that is easier and more obvious to make.

CONCLUSION

The religious values and public activism of women working on social justice issues and conservative cultural issues share some important motivating values. Women engaged in each see their work as a calling and feel obligated to act based on an ethic given by God. To achieve a world consonant with their religious values, all of the women we interviewed hope to affect policies, legislation, and public life in

some way. They bring a deep and certain concept of morality to their political and civic work. They hope to give it visibility and institutionalize it in policy.

In this sense, across races, religions, and even political perspectives, the women interviewed express a great deal of certainty about their values and the call to community. Almost all express confidence in what they and their religious values stand for. In other words, all claim religious agency and authority on some level.

At the same time, major differences divide how these women talk about God, their relationships with God, and the links between

Through their focus on the importance of relationships and community, the women social welfare and justice activists we interviewed are bringing “female” values from the private sphere into public life.

their religious values and traditions and their political or civic activism. The differences lead women to very different goals in politics, policy, and society. In general, conservative women involved in activism around cultural issues have a more intervening and hierarchical understanding of God, and they are more focused on building a society based on strict moral dictates that will bring cohesion and rewards based on God’s favor. They see adherence to a strict interpretation of God’s will, unchanging in the face of social and political change, as a fundamental goal. This justifies and compels them to work on behalf of traditional values and moral codes that in part call for women’s exclusion as fully equal actors in public life.

In contrast, women social justice activists, many but not all of whom are progressives, describe a relationship with God that is more equal and nurturing, less judgmental, and informed by social and political contexts. These women seek to know and engage God in their relationships with others—in community—and they see service and justice work as ways to do so. Some think about their activism more politically or radically than others, and women of color and women from smaller U.S. religions are particularly likely to see their faith as demanding a fight for justice rather than simple devotion to service. For the most part, their differences with women like the conservative cultural activists we interviewed probably preclude working together on the vast majority of issues.

Through their focus on the importance of relationships and community, the women social welfare and justice activists we interviewed are bringing “female” values from the private sphere into public life. Thus they more radically challenge the idea of male religious and political authority than the conservative cultural activists we interviewed. As the next chapter argues, their efforts to do so also promote a vision of U.S. politics and society that infuses the idea of interconnectedness and shared well-being into the traditional focus on rights, an approach to social welfare that combines ideas about individual and shared rights and responsibilities. The next chapter explores this idea in more detail, by delving more deeply into the religious values that women social justice activists see as underlying their activist work.

“God Is in the Space Between Us”: The Values of Religious Women Activists Working for Social Justice

The obligation to work in community is central to women religious activists, and for those involved in social welfare issues, it is a call to engage others and work on behalf of the disadvantaged. What values, though, inform that mandate? What values surround the public vision promoted by religious women social justice activists? This chapter looks at these questions, analyzing why the activists we interviewed do what they do. Because their values are so key to their identities—religious, political, and personal—they are also key to understanding the potential activism of religious women across the country, particularly on behalf of issues of social welfare and justice.

Among the women we interviewed, the obligation to protect the weakest or work for justice is expressed as coming from many types of values, grouped here around four main themes. At the most basic level, women social justice activists

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activism as acting on a sense of connectedness with humanity and the world—in fact, this particular theme underlies the way that most of the women think about their activism and values overall. In many ways, each of these three sets of values reflects the historical and ongoing experiences of women in the private or family sphere: they are linked to the roles, norms, and relationships that women often experience as central to their lives. These are also values that are often stressed in religious contexts by many denominations. For both reasons, it is not surprising that women would prioritize them.

A fourth set of values exists in tandem with these first three: a hope to protect and fight for the worth and dignity of every individual. This set of values reflects the goals of many rights-based movements with religious justifications, such as the civil rights movement and movements around liberation theologies, in its insistence that each person should have the opportunity to live in dignity because of their intrinsic value, often based on the perceived presence of God. In some ways, it dovetails with American ideas about rights, focused as it has often been on the need to ensure

speaking of a sense of stewardship—a need to leave the world a better place or to give back by serving others. Some describe a need to live out values of love, peace, and compassion. Most describe their

equality of access and opportunity. In other ways, it entails a fight for exactly what women and other disadvantaged groups have been missing: agency and authority. In addition, the concept of rights described by many of the women interviewed cannot be fully understood outside their other values: it is intertwined with and informed by the concepts of stewardship, love, and interconnectedness.

The values described here, of course, are understood by the women we interviewed in the context of their sense of moral obligation to work in community, as discussed in the previous two chapters. Their values work in tandem with a responsibility that many women feel to bring the values of their faith into community with others, translated into a need to work for the well-being and justice of the disadvantaged. As one woman summed it up using the language of Martin Luther King, Jr., the goal is “to empower others, to build the beloved kingdom, to create a society of equality and justice, where each person works to the greatest extent of their ability and everyone’s needs are met.” It is this community orientation that draws the women we interviewed to activist work, gives them the energy to do it, and brings them joy even when it is difficult. It gives them a sense of moral authority and agency as religious and political leaders.

In this context, the four sets of values described by the women social justice activists we interviewed converge to suggest a model of community and shared responsibility that can transform traditional ways of talking about politics, policy, and society in the United States. By bringing together an explicitly political emphasis on relationships, caring, mutuality, and interconnectedness with a focus on rights and equality, women bring to political and civic life a very different approach to issues of justice and equality than the largely rights-based talk that has dominated mainstream American political discussion, including justifications often used by movements around civil rights, women’s equality, or economic justice. The model articulated by the women we interviewed shares many goals and values with these movements; both hope to alleviate inequality and raise the well-being of citizens, for example. But by emphasizing values more commonly associated with family and private sphere—a more relational approach focused on interconnectedness and mutuality—women demand that morality and moral values take context and connectedness into account as factors that are integral to rights and well-being. They demand that we remove an underlying tendency to judge behavior against standards that make little sense in many, if not most, contexts. They demand respect for moral agency and authority—including their own.

The values outlined here also suggest a new way of thinking about civil society and the relationship of citizens to government and to each other. They offer an approach that challenges the dominant American view of politics placing the government at the very center of efforts to promote social welfare. The approach suggested by these values does not deny that the government should play an important role, but it supplements that role with an emphasis on citizens’ responsibility to each other, including a need to engage those unlike us in relationship. In other words, it suggests that our sense of responsibility should be integrated with our sense of

individual rights. This approach shifts the relationship between citizens and their state, from simply demanding that rights be protected or expanded, to creating a sense of responsibility to respect individual dignity by building welfare through a combination of government and citizen activism. It also demands respect for individual agency through policies and practices that allow individuals to exercise their agency regardless of race, gender, class, or access to resources such as time, money, or political influence.

The public vision of women, then, challenges how we think about morality and politics. Not only does it involve women claiming their own moral authority and agency to claim a public voice, but it also involves rethinking some of our underlying assumptions about the rights and responsibilities most central to American democracy, as well as the current relationships among citizens, civil society, and government. This, in turn, has implications for American leadership in politics, religion, and civil society, a topic discussed in chapter 6.

LEAVING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

Many women are motivated to act by a fairly simple type of value: a hope to leave the world better than they found it. This idea is sometimes described as giving back based on a woman's blessings, particularly to help those who have less, or as a sense of stewardship for God's creation. It is often described as one of the most important tenets of women's religious faith or traditions. This set of ideas is articulated by about a third of the women interviewed, in response to questions about why they feel an obligation to participate in civic or political life.

The hope to leave the world better off is evident, of course, in quotes from previous chapters. For example: "The message of the gospels has to do with giving of what we have, taking care of people who don't have, distributing our abundance.... I can put all my energy and some of my money into things that make the world better." It is elaborated in many other ways, though.

A white Jewish woman, asked about the most important reward of her activism, answers that it gives her life and faith meaning, because she gets "a sense of making a difference in the world.... People are actually going to have better lives."

A Hispanic mainline Protestant finds this idea fundamental to her Christianity: "It seems to me the overall image of what it means to be a Christian is to change the world for the better, and that has allowed me to embark in my work."

An Asian American Muslim argues that because she has had the opportunity to learn about and question her faith, she then has "no choice but to take the next step, which is to get involved in the larger community.... We must share and become involved for our own good, for the good of the community."

For all these women, making choices that create a better world is integral to their faith. It compels them to work for change within their communities. It can also encourage them to think globally about the impact of their actions, even when they are on a smaller level. A Hispanic Muslim says as much:

When I was young and beautiful and stupid, I used to get so frustrated because I wanted to change the world, and I couldn't. But now I know better what changing the world is. The perception you will have about me or Muslims once you walk out of this conversation is not the same that you may have had when you walked in. Therefore, I just changed the world one more time. I do not need to, let's say, go and tell the people in Northern Ireland, 'Okay, this is it, people. Knock it off and live in peace.' No. But those kids came, and they listened to me when I talked. And they asked questions, and very hard and honest questions. But they got honest answers. And now they left here knowing something they didn't know before. I was able to change the world that day. So I know now that, yes, we can change the world.... If Allah takes my soul right now, I know the world is different from when I came to it. And not just because let's say, apartheid ended and some other things. No. I made a difference; I know I made a difference.

Some women, especially those involved in environmental issues, speak about their hope to improve the world in terms of caring for creation, a very direct interpretation of the idea of stewardship. A Baha'i involved in community organizing around environmental issues states that her faith led her in this direction: "We believe that God is the creator, and we're just part of His creation. And we need to be responsible for how the world and environment are used." Another environmentalist, a minister, states that one of the responsibilities common to all faiths is "that we care for creation." This idea, though, is not only expressed by women involved in environmentalism. A nondenominational Christian involved in youth service states that "God has called us to be stewards of this earth and stewards of the life that He's given us. And so that's my role here."

Other women describe a hope to improve the world by giving back in the face of what they see as blessings of abundance. For example, an African American Eastern Orthodox woman describes an imperative to use and share her privilege for others:

We're here to care for each person that's on the earth, and if much is given to you, much is expected, so there isn't any room for just putting in money in a communion plate and saying that you've done enough. If there is someone that is in need, whether or not they've asked for it, you're to make yourself available. And for many of us, we came from a privileged background—there were high expectations [laughs], from God, for us to live out our faith.

A white Sikh links the idea of giving back with her broader desire to leave the world better. She sees giving back as specific to her religious tradition—a draw that was part of why she converted to it from Christianity. Her larger personal hope, though, involves an even larger legacy, rooted in her sense of family:

The Sikh faith, one of its basic tenets is service to others. It's earning your living righteously and sharing what you earn with others. So, I have an obligation in that regard. I need to, I want to help people—it makes sense to me, it's one of the reasons why I'm a Sikh—because why wouldn't I? Why wouldn't you want to do that? Of course you would. But also, personally, leaving a legacy is important to me. Certainly that is part of the Sikh faith, but not as much as sharing what you earn with others, earning a living righteously, and sharing what you earn with others. But children are the future, and so I have children, and now I have grandchildren. I want them to have a different kind of world, an improved world. Not that the one we have now is so bad, I'm not saying that, but why not if we can see other ways that it could be better, why not do it?

For this woman, faith and values come from both her individual religious tradition and her roles as a mother and grandmother. In other words, her social justice work is informed by her values as a Sikh and as a woman.

The ideas expressed here are not, of course, felt only by religious women, and even among a few of the religious women we interviewed, the imperative to make the world better is not necessarily based on faith. Faith does, though, provide guidance for how to direct their activist energies. As one describes the dynamic,

[My faith] reminds me of my power to make things better for humanity.... [This is] a moral imperative. That's what I would say. And the funny thing is that I had the moral imperative before I had faith. The faith part just helped me know how to channel it. The moral imperative is the one thing that's remained constant.... I find purpose leaving something better than you find it.

In other words, religious values helped this woman think about how to apply her hope to change the world. She also says that her faith helped her put her goals in perspective and attracted her to a specifically religious setting for her work, a setting that helped her pull her interests and values together in a particularly fulfilling way.

Even this approach, though, is unusual among the women we interviewed. For almost all of those who articulated a basic desire to make the world better, religious faith and values were seen as providing the foundation for this need.

The link for many women between faith and making a positive contribution to the world makes sense in the context of women's traditional roles and experiences with religion. Most U.S. religious traditions have required women to give of themselves unselfishly in the private sphere, on behalf of their families and religious or political communities, without expecting any reward—or even any sense of public agency or authority, despite fulfilling this traditional role well (e.g., Buchanan 1996; Duck 1993). The women we interviewed follow in this tradition of selfless giving. A few even articulate the link between this idea and their own family life and experiences, referring to the hope to leave the world better on behalf of children

or grandchildren. But these women also bring to this idea a different sense of their public and private roles: rather than confine their need to create a better world to personal relationships, family, or childrearing, they bring this value to the public sphere, demanding and contributing to change. To accomplish this, they work in community, as or with civic and political leaders.

LOVE, PEACE, AND COMPASSION

Another set of values that many women consider basic to their activism are related to how we are expected to treat others: with love, peace, and compassion. These values are presented by many as the most fundamental prescription for how women (and men) are expected to approach the world. Approximately one in five women specifically names these values as a primary reason for her activist work, and many others allude to them less directly, speaking of a need to care for others or build a sense of empathy for the poor, for example. Most of the women who speak of their activism as based on love or compassion are Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, reflecting the emphasis of each religion's scriptures on commandments to "love thy neighbor" or to live by the Golden Rule. These commandments are framed as demanding activism and, by some women, political solutions that reflect a caring and loving community. Like the mandate to improve the world, it is a very communally oriented set of values focused very much on relationships with others.

An Arab American Muslim describes love and peace as outwardly focused values important to her religious tradition: "Sufis harbor feelings of love, peace, and harmony inside, and spread it outside, without any distinctions. This is the basic concept of Islam."

A Hispanic Christian makes a similar link: "The God that I subscribe to is a God of love and compassion, and of change and working for that greater good. And it's that which is clearly—there's a correlation with my activism in social justice. So they definitely fuel each other."

A white mainline Protestant also sees love as an important value connected to justice: "It's what does God require of us: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. One of the big influences on me has been that the scripture seems pretty clear cut: Be kind and loving. Not only to the people who are easy to be kind and loving to, but find ways of carrying that through in a more challenging situation."

A Hispanic Muslim describes her work as living out her religious value of peace in particular: "We Muslims are commanded to let other people know about our beliefs and to live in peace in the communities where we live. It doesn't matter what those communities believe. And I just felt that I was doing what I was commanded to do. That's all."

A white evangelical Christian connects love, justice, and equality: "I think the biggest link for me is that my spiritual call as a Christian is primarily to love other people. And I think that most of the inequality and lack of justice in this world is

caused by people not truly loving one another. And so my sense of what the impact of love is, is an impact of equality and justice in this world.”

A white Catholic makes a similar link: “To me, doing this sort of thing is just something that comes naturally and logically if you believe in the calling to love your neighbor as yourself. There just isn’t any doubt about it when it comes to mind. You just go and do it; it’s what you’re supposed to do.... It’s almost second nature to live that out.”

Some women recognize that love and compassion are important not only to their own religious traditions, but to others. As a Hispanic Catholic argues, “[All religions] have in common compassion and forgiveness and sharing. And so in that sense, it really doesn’t matter whether you’re from this church or that church, because from my perspective, to a great extent that’s the core.”

Love and compassion become public values that call for a new relationship by individuals with each other and their communities on behalf of social welfare.

Experiencing love and compassion as common religious values is, for some women, an attraction to doing social justice work in an interfaith setting. Finding that commonality allows them to both learn about these similar values and also appreciate their own religious values and traditions. As one woman says,

It has been fun to discover the commonalities among the various congregations, the common ground that a Protestant group like Methodists, the common ground that they’ll have with Catholic churches or Lutheran churches or even the Unitarians?... [and] many of the same beliefs, motivations, cross-influences that Christianity shares with Islam and Judaism. It can serve as a way to reinforce your own beliefs, and broaden them, too, because you’re able to absorb many of the benefits of other faiths.

Like creating a better world, love and compassion make sense as a set of religious values held by women; they, too, fit with women’s traditionally prescribed religious roles, particularly as mothers. Religion often calls on mothers to give themselves up completely to love their children and husbands (e.g., Duck 1993). But again, the women we interviewed take this role and apply it to public activism, calling on individuals to take responsibility for the well-being of each other and society. Love and compassion become public values that call for a new relationship by individuals with each other and their communities on behalf of social welfare.

The power of love and compassion as public values is recognized by several of the women leaders we interviewed. These leaders see such values as potential motivators for activism, ways to create a sense of responsibility among individuals to promote justice and well-being. The leader of one group, a Unitarian minister, describes her organization’s mission:

We say that there are two great responsibilities that are common to all faiths: that we love one another, and that we care for creation. Our mission is to create hopeful and welcoming spaces where people of every faith can come together to fulfill those responsibilities through reflection on their own faith, applying the faith teachings to their decisions in economic and ecological matters, and then working together with people of every faith to create a common future that is economically sustainable and ecologically just.

For her, love creates a sense of obligation that can speak to people of a variety of faiths and bring them into civic and political activism.

Another woman, also the director of an interfaith social justice group, has a similar view of love and compassion as ways to draw people into social justice work. For her, these values are so basic, and widespread, that they provide a profound opportunity to tap into potential activism:

Both in the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures... [it says that the most important things are] to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself, right? Those are

Because of the broad and basic appeal of these values of love and compassion, they can be used to encourage people to engage in more political forms of activism.

the two core principles in the scriptures. And it's so hard for me to imagine how you can love your neighbor as yourself and not

fundamentally want them to have adequate resources to live their lives. And you know what's really interesting—I find, even with people that you can disagree on a lot of social kinds of issues about, almost everybody fundamentally believes that. And they don't really believe that people should be without decent incomes, without health care benefits. Where you really disagree is how are you going to make that happen... But that fundamental appeal to caring for your neighbor, I think, is really core in certainly the Christian and Hebrew scriptures but it's also very core in the Koran, very core. And so then the question becomes how do we do that? And what does that mean? And the way it has expressed itself primarily in our society is in terms of people doing soup kitchens and shelters. And yet I think the impulse that has people do all that charitable stuff is one that should be nurtured, because it's not a bad impulse. But what we haven't done is built on that impulse to do that and show people that there are additional effective things that they can do. And, frankly, made them easy for people. Because people's lives are crazy, right? So how do you connect that? So I don't really believe that people don't want to do more. I think they don't know how and they don't know how to in small ways. And so I really believe that it's an organizing challenge. Now, I'm not saying I've got it figured out because I don't, right. But I think I'm trying because I think the spiritual connection of connecting with people and caring about people is so fundamental.

This leader and organizer makes the leap to public activism in a particularly interesting way. She thinks of love and compassion as values that can move people from a motivation to serve—a more traditional and less political role—to a motivation to work for justice and systemic change. In other words, because of the broad and basic appeal of these values of love and compassion, they can be used to encourage people to engage in more political forms of activism. Interestingly, this woman's organization is not devoted to a traditionally "female" type of activism—it promotes worker justice, and it works closely with many clergy, a male-dominated field. But it is staffed primarily by women and draws primarily women as volunteers. In other words, the organization's message and goals are somehow appealing particularly to women. Given the emphasis by its leadership on love and compassion, the group's success at mobilizing women suggests that these values resonate well with women as motivators.

It may be easier for many women to think of love and compassion as publicly relevant values in part thanks to the legacy of religion and values in the civil rights movement and other social movements of the mid to late 20th century that were, and are, dedicated to social justice and equality. Perhaps the most visible leader of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., evoked these values in his concept of the "beloved community," a vision of society that was based on integration and interrelatedness and would result in justice for everyone, regardless of race or religion (Marsh 2004; Smith and Zepp 1974). The ideas he articulated are evident in how many of the women activists we interviewed describe their own values of love and compassion.

Not only can values of love and compassion serve as motivators and sources of inspiration, but they can allow women to claim a particular type of moral authority, as the people most responsible for fostering and living out those values.

At the same time, for women these values have a different history and context that is rooted for many in their traditional roles, and bringing these values to public life remains an important step to claiming public authority and agency. The vision of leaders such as Martin Luther King is by no means fulfilled, and women may be able to make a specific contribution to that journey. Because of women's experiences in the private sphere, they can bring their own particular authority to speaking about these values: they are historically exactly what has been required of women. Not only can they serve as motivators and sources of inspiration, then, but they can allow women to claim a particular type of moral authority, as the people most responsible for fostering and living out the values of love and compassion.

It is important to note that this does not mean requiring women to live out an essential role based on values that are "natural" to them. Instead, it suggests that women can bring their specific experiences to bear on the public world by defining and claiming the values that they have lived out, and been expected to live out, in their private lives as their primary roles (men, of course, also experience love, but the expectations they have for how they should do so are very different). In other words,

because women are *expected* to be the keepers of these values in the private sphere, they can perhaps claim a certain authority over them in the public sphere.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

A third set of values is articulated as a need to recognize that all people are interconnected and, based on this connectedness, that we have a responsibility to work against injustice or inequality as a communal problem. Interestingly, this idea is expressed almost unanimously by the women who were interviewed from religions besides Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—in our sample, Buddhists, Hindus, and one Sikh. Christians, Jews, and Muslims also articulate it, though, and it is the most common theme overall, with more than half of the women we interviewed expressing it directly, and many others touching on the concept in the context of their understandings of other values (some of these ideas are evident in the quotes and analysis above and in preceding chapters). Because it is so common—and because so many of the other values articulated by women overlap with this idea—it can be thought of as a central theme underlying the public values and visions that the women we interviewed bring to U.S. politics and society.

The language used to describe the idea of interconnectedness varies, but it often comes down to a sense that people cannot shut themselves off from others, particularly those who are unlike them. Many women describe this as a sense of empathy, a link to other people as “neighbors” or “brothers and sisters,” or even as “connecting to what is the suffering in the world.” One, a white Episcopalian, says, “I think the most important part is you’re connected to everybody else, and especially people that are at the bottom.” Another, an Asian American Hindu, perhaps sums it up best:

There’s a connection between all human beings, and if you are going to act aggressively and minimize somebody’s rights, or just completely strip them of their rights and abuse them or what have you—what does that say for the morality that we are being taught?.... I don’t feel like I could live and work in a setting that I know is going to lead to somebody being exploited in some sense. I don’t feel like I could wake up every day and look at myself and say, good job, you’re a great person.

This woman in some ways typifies how women from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism think about the basic values motivating their activism, with the idea of interconnectedness central to their view of spirituality. For many Hindus, as the quote above exemplifies, a similar sense of connectedness undergirds their activism. The one Sikh woman interviewed in the project has a similar worldview, describing a hope that living a more conscious life, in part through her religious and spiritual practices, would spread calmness and mitigate against fear and anger. She, too, ties these ideas to a sense of interconnectedness with others and the world. For the Buddhist women interviewed, the idea of the Buddhist Golden Chain, linking all people, requires a communal responsibility—individuals must work to protect those

who are weaker than themselves. This brings a need to act purely and beautifully, which for many means an obligation to work in community. In addition, it means thinking about even small decisions as they may affect an interconnected world:

I need to do my own part. For trick or treat this year, and I've done this for several years now, I've bought the Fair Trade chocolate candy bars and given those out. It's very expensive but... I feel like I have a choice there. I can buy candy that's going to hurt people. Or I can buy candy that's going to do something to help these farmers and these families, and I feel like I have choices. So I do make those choices and I do feel better. It's kind of like the doctors take that oath, first hurt no one, you know? That's part of Buddhism, too.

The focus on interconnectedness by Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in part makes sense given the focus of these religious traditions. Buddhist denominations, for example, do not involve a monotheistic and supernatural God, but instead assert that human attitudes and behaviors bring about suffering. Individuals can end suffering by letting go of desire and achieving enlightenment, a sense of calm and harmony with the universe (Gross 1993). Given this context, it is not surprising that Buddhist women would give importance to the idea of interconnectedness (and shared responsibility) as a religious value.

Hinduism, too, differs from the traditional Western religions in its concept of the divine. Hindus believe in many gods and goddesses, although they often worship only one, and these multiple divinities are seen as expressing different attributes or aspects of one divine being. Hindus also recognize that humans experience life and the divine in many different contexts, bringing to it individual experiences and perspectives, and they do not elevate any of these “truths” over others. This brings Hindus a very pluralistic view of religion and society. At the same time, Hindus recognize a universal spirit that is in all living beings; outer forms are illusory, and we are all one and interconnected. Again, it is not surprising that Hindu women would express these ideas in how they think about social justice.

The religious values held by Buddhist and Hindu women should also be contextualized by the experience of these women, especially among those who are Asian American, as both religious and racial outsiders in the United States. Like Islamic women, many of the Hindu and Buddhist women interviewed stress their experiences as Asian Americans and, among some, as immigrants or the children of immigrants. They note that historically their communities have been somewhat isolated from white, mainstream society, in part because of a lack of outreach by white Americans—even in interfaith contexts—and in part because of their own need to protect and sustain their communities, especially, for some, within a history of oppression and distrust. This dynamic, for example, is articulated by Japanese American women whose families experienced internment during World War II.

Interestingly, Asian American women from both Southeast and Northern Asian heritage note that their experiences working on social justice issues bring an increased awareness of the isolation of their communities and a frustration with the

lack of stronger ties with predominantly white social justice groups. In other words, they seek a more active role building bridges between their communities and white, often Christian America, as a way to live out the principle of interconnectedness. Simultaneously, they express a heightened awareness of diversity within their own Asian American communities, in particular growing diversity among newer immigrants. Both Japanese American and Indian American women, for example, note that their temples and organizations have had to work to build relationships with Southeast Asian communities and temples, many of which are comprised of newer immigrants, and that at times they have met resistance and suspicion from both sides. Again, though, these women see this outreach as important, both to

*“Ultimately we’re all connected, and...biologically and spiritually
and environmentally we’re all connected to each other.”*

protect the overall rights and needs of Asian Americans, and to build on the idea of interconnectedness.

Sikhs differ from Buddhists and Hindus in that they worship one supernatural God, and they seek oneness with that God. They also see the interconnectedness of life as a basic religious principle. Although we interviewed only one Sikh woman (a convert to Sikhism), her commitment to these principles is evident in her assertion that how she lives her life would affect the greater world, including the world she leaves for her children and grandchildren.

Many Christians, Jews, and Muslims also articulate the idea of interconnectedness. A white Catholic echoes the ideas of the Hindu woman above:

I guess my worldview is that ultimately we’re all connected, and that biologically and spiritually and environmentally we’re all connected to each other. And even though some people are able to remove themselves from that connection based on wealth and privilege, ultimately we are all connected. So if you’re paying poverty wages, and you’ve got a community in crisis where the families can’t spend time with their children, or participate in politics or civic life because all they can do is work, just to make ends meet, or simply because they’re demoralized because they can’t find a job that pays anything and they don’t see the system working for them, then you’ve got all kinds of problems in a community, and it affects security and safety and health and welfare and everything. And I just think that some people are able to remove themselves from that, but only for a certain amount of time. And frankly I think it’s not spiritually healthy to be one of those people that removes yourself too much from all of that.... I feel no desire to work in a business that makes profit for somebody else, but I know that a lot of people do that and that’s just fine. People need to make money, and we need to be creative, and people have basic needs that need to be met, and we can do it in a variety of ways and through

enterprise, but I do believe that ultimately we need to be accountable to the people that work for us and with us.

A white mainline Protestant makes a similar argument, also adding that for her, the experience of interconnectedness requires separating out personal dislikes for other people: “You don’t have to like each other. We certainly don’t expect that. We do see that. But we expect people to cooperate with each other. And so from my Christian tradition that—that’s just so deeply rooted in that.”

For some women, the sense of interconnectedness is closely tied to the idea, elaborated in chapter 3, of finding relationship with God in relationships with others. A white Rabbi describes this idea in beautiful language:

God is in the space between human beings, and all these ethical commandments, and ritual commandments are all bound up together, and any relationship that you have with God, any relationship with human beings are tied together.

For other women, though, the sense of connection is less divine. One woman, a Hispanic Catholic, has a hard time describing how simply but profoundly she feels this idea, but eventually describes it this way: “I just...How can I say it? That’s a given. That’s a human being, that’s my fellow person. I don’t have to find Jesus in them. I don’t. Honest to God.”

The idea of interconnectedness is also used by women social justice leaders to motivate women to act on behalf of justice. In a very concrete way, one organizer, an African American member of the Eastern Orthodox Church, talks about connectedness to get other people from her faith involved:

It’s helped in terms of talking to a lot of my friends who are also Eastern Orthodox... These are folks that we work with, these are people that we see on the streets, people who clean the parish, and we need to do something that is permanent and not just a band-aid. And people are usually receptive to that if you can put it in a language that’s not so in your face, and basically making them feel that they’re terrible human beings because they don’t do or say what you do. And that’s where a lot of the resistance comes from, at least for Eastern Orthodox, that they feel it’s a judgment call.

The idea of interconnectedness, then, brings a humanity to the work that can be inspiring rather than alienating, even as it articulates the idea of obligation.

The idea of interconnectedness spans religious traditions more broadly than the other values outlined in this chapter. In many ways, of course, it overlaps with the other values discussed: the value of love and compassion, for example, as articulated by many women encompasses an idea that we are all affected by the way that we treat others, individually and communally. In a larger sense, then, the idea of interconnectedness can be seen as a theme underlying how many religious women involved in social justice work are inspired to act.

Like many of the other values described by women, the idea of interconnectedness can be understood as flowing from the experiences that many have in the private or family sphere. Relationships in family can involve what is often called a more “relational” view, focused less on hierarchy and rigidity and more on an ethic of care and nurturing. As a result, some researchers argue, women’s values are more focused on context and interconnectedness (e.g., Gilligan 1982; J. Wood 1993). Certainly, many of the women we interviewed articulate values that fit with this understanding, across racial and religious lines.

Again, though, the women we interviewed bring the value of interconnectedness out of the private and into the public sphere, applying it to civic and political life. With this step, it can be used to transform the rights-based approach more commonly used to debate many social welfare policies in the United States: it adds to these rights a sense of a responsibility tied to community and shared experiences. At a basic level, these women argue, we need access to opportunity. We need it not just as a way to advance individual political and economic rights, but as a way to better the community as a whole, the relationships in which we are all imbedded. We benefit, and not just personally if we are targeted recipients of social welfare policies, but as members of stronger and healthier communities.

THE BASIC WORTH AND DIGNITY OF GOD’S CHILDREN

A final set of values that women link to social justice evokes the idea that every person has inherent worth or dignity. This theme is expressed in a direct way primarily by Christians, Jews, and Muslims; about one in three women explicitly touches on the idea. It was also less directly articulated by many other women, including many from the smaller U.S. traditions, who see their activism as working for justice. As is evident in chapter 3, women justice activists often use concepts such as inequality and oppression, or empowerment and liberation, in ways that evoke a dedication to protecting rights, particularly of the dispossessed.

For many women, this idea not only inspires activism but shapes how they go about treating the people they work with or serve through their activist efforts. Interestingly, the concept is often explicitly linked to working for political solutions that are framed as protecting human rights. The rights-based language used here, though, is different from the way that rights are often cast in American politics: it is understood as both an individual and a communal value, requiring a broad responsibility to develop communities, policies, and contexts that allow each individual to achieve their full potential. That is, it is understood in the context of the values of stewardship, love, and interconnectedness described above.

A white Catholic, for example, describes the public implications of her ideas about dignity:

I think that’s where [my commitment to social justice] came from... that idea that we’ve got to go beyond ourselves, that both from a theological perspective that everybody has dignity, as well as just out of sheer fairness,

that we have to go outside of ourselves to make sure that everybody is treated the way that everybody should be treated.

Similarly, an African American Christian describes her new congregation's support for her social justice work because of its focus on inherent worth:

[My new congregation] really propelled me into the interfaith work, because part of the belief system is that you can come from any denomination or worship experience and be a part of it, because the only belief that everyone has in commonality is that everybody's worthy, [laughs] and that before you act you should consider whether or not your actions demonstrate love for yourself, for God, and for your fellow man.

The idea of inherent dignity is crucial, for many women, to how they go about their activism, guiding their interactions with other activists and with the people they serve. For the leader of one organization, a white Unitarian, respecting people's inherent worth means treating them with trust and high expectations—which she also sees as traits that women are more likely to have:

It's that you will go to someone that you want to make outreach to, assume that they are a worthy child of god, assume that they are of enormous potential that they may or may not be using, and their motivations are good, assume that they will respond to love in a loving way, and call on them to be the person they were created by God to be, and expect that they will respond in a positive way. That if you expect the best of people, the best is what you will get—which I think is how moms operate, and it's certainly how I tried to operate as a mom when my kids were little.

This woman ties her understanding of basic dignity back to mothering and her own values as a caregiver. She consciously brings her private experiences to bear on public life.

In a very different context, an African American Christian sees the basic value of worthiness as integral to how she and her organization serve poor women. Because she sees that many poor women feel a lack of confidence or dignity, she tries to inspire a sense of self-worth in the women she works with. She brings her own experience to this work. As a former welfare recipient, she herself felt unworthy. She now roots her developing confidence in her faith:

You are worthy. People that come into our organization, you can just see what they need. Like, these women came in and they needed help with food. I could look at them and tell that they had a drink, maybe drugs, or whatever. The women began to talk about how they were not worthy. I said, you know what He says in the Bible? I said to them, when we get ready to go home [to heaven]? All of us will be lined up to get in the gates of heaven, and the ones that go to church every Sunday, all showing up with their big hats on and new suits, thinking that they will be the first ones to get in. I told them I bet you placed yourself and the back of the

line, thinking that you are not worthy enough to get in. Well He will reach all the way to the back of line and pull you out and bring you in first. Their faces began to light up like never before, and it was just the kind words and inspirations that made their day.

Another activist—herself a low-income immigrant—sees the idea of dignity as equally important, and she, too, ties it to her faith:

I am a beautiful daughter from God. This is the best way for me to be confident. And I want all my brothers and sisters [to] feel like that, very special and very proud to be daughters and sons from God.... We can try to do something to help this to happen. For that reason, I like to involve in all of my relationships, that they can change their life for the better, if they feel important like they are.

The idea of inherent worth and dignity often comes from a belief that there is something divine in every person, so that serving others also means serving God. All of the women who articulated this particular idea are explicitly Christian, and many drew the link to the specific Gospel passage in which Jesus Christ tells his apostles that they serve Him by serving the disadvantaged:

[There's] Matthew 25: 'When I was a prisoner, you visited me. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink.' And the disciples said, 'When did we do that? We don't remember ever doing that for you, Jesus.' And Jesus says, 'Whenever you do this for somebody else, you're doing it for me.' And I guess I'm sucker enough to think that's actually true.... I have a tremendous sense of the presence of God and the presence of holy, of holiness, when I engage with picketing, standing on the sidewalk, going to the [hotel for the homeless], serving dinner to the homeless. It feels more like going to church than going to church does. It feels like God is present in these venues that are not set up specifically for God. That God has a way of being everywhere, in the most unexpected places, and I feel that connection when I'm, you know, buying pizza for the guys at the [hotel] or trying to help somebody.

For this woman, being in service is itself a religious experience, which she also says gives her sustenance and joy that allows her to keep at the work instead of burning out. Another woman echoes this sentiment:

It comes right out of my strong conviction that all of us are created in the image of God, which then means we are all created in goodness. And that image of God remains in every one of us, no matter who we are or what we've done, and all of us deserve the dignity and respect of being a person of God. And therefore, I find it just as rewarding and hopeful to work in the detention ministry as I do with little tiny kids that I just have fun with, because I see that image of God in everybody, mostly [laughs], most of the time [laughs], just most of the time [laughs].

Another woman sees her religion's emphasis on seeing God in all people as a way to keep from hating the people she fights against politically. Her religious value calls her not only to fight for justice, but to do so in a way that recognizes the humanity, and divinity, of her political opponents:

The other point is, and I have to hand this to Quakerism, is that it's very good at not demonizing, not—seeking to see the humanity in others. Let me give you an example, soon after 9/11 there was a woman in our meeting who would stand up and say, 'Please hold in the light,' which is like hold in prayer, Osama Bin Laden, President Bush, Dick Cheney, and you could see people bristling, how dare she, and I know I bristled sometimes too. But this is an organization that says to us you can oppose this behavior but you still have to save the humanity of this earth.... If you see them as the other you'll never get past that barrier.... [This is because of] seeing the divine within each human being, knowing that this person is a part of God [laughs].

Many of the women who talk about worth and dignity as basic faith values tie these ideas specifically to political changes involving human rights. This connection is not surprising, because the idea of inherent dignity can easily be translated to demand protection for what people see as God-given rights to protect that dignity, including basic levels of well-being that allow them to achieve their potential. This notion is, for example, basic to understandings of the social gospel and liberation theology (Edwards and Gifford 2003; Thistlewaite and Engel 1998). It is also, perhaps, most compatible with the rights-based language often used in American political debate—a relatively easy way to translate religious values into political ones, given the commonality of the language.

An African American minister, for example, sees a set of human rights coming from her creation by God. As a result, she fights for justice through policy change. As she describes her mission,

My personal belief is that my rights as a human being are endowed by my Creator, not by government or not by any political bent. And so I have a right to be all that I can be, and I believe everyone on the planet has a right to be all that they can be, in the context of their culture, in the context of the world that they live in. And anything that would stop me from being able to achieve or to do or to think the way that I felt was important for my survival and my family's survival would be an injustice.

For this woman, religious values mandate her human-rights based approach to social justice issues. The logic is simple: if God created us, we are sacred and worthy, and so we have certain basic rights. As a woman of faith, she will fight for those rights.

Because the language of rights is so easily linked to politics, particularly American ideas about them, it is perhaps surprising that the concept of basic rights and dignity is not described even more frequently among the women we interviewed. There may be a few reasons why it is not. First, as argued throughout this report, in many ways

women's lives and experiences insist on a focus that is more deeply invested in the ideas of compassion, stewardship, or connectedness described above—ideas that more easily fit traditional ideas about women's proper roles and the ways those roles have played out in the public and family spheres. In contrast, the ideas of individual dignity and rights are not only more closely associated with the public sphere, but both dignity and rights have often been denied women. As a result, they may be downplayed in women's thinking as they approach issues of welfare and justice, even as this value relates to politics. Second, the language of rights and morality as a political concept has often been downplayed in mainstream religious traditions, and certainly congregations, in the United States. As noted earlier, most congregations, and particularly those outside African American Christian congregations and Judaism, do not address issues of justice at all, and the theologies that most visibly rely on the idea of dignity (such as liberation theologies) are not central to the vast majority of U.S. congregations, or even denominations. Women are likely influenced by this lack of emphasis in congregational life.

Still, the focus on worth and dignity articulated by many women is important given the history of religious denial of women's worth and value. This legacy has ignored or erased the autonomy and agency, particularly in public life, of women and people of color, and so attempts to reclaim it can be crucial to helping them claim a public role. Liberation theologies in the United States and abroad, including some feminist theologies, have focused on individual worth as demanding the fight for social justice by requiring that the context and lives of disadvantaged people inform religion and religious thought, rather than ignoring the present for salvation and liberation after death (Thistlethwaite and Engel 1998). Women who evoke these

Most of the women interviewed articulate the idea of rights, worth, and dignity within the specific context of community and shared responsibility. "Part of what you do is that you build community, that you recognize the sacredness of every person."

ideas in some ways follow in the footsteps of this tradition, an important (but not mainstream) strain of modern religious thinking.

As the last quote above illustrates, approaches based on individual dignity also call for respecting individual moral agency by acknowledging it among all members of the community in a real and meaningful way. This means, in part, creating conditions that will allow people to make choices and decisions that are not dictated solely or even significantly by harmful social and economic conditions. In this focus, not only do women social justice activists demand agency and authority for themselves, but for others who have traditionally been denied it.

Women also bring their experiences to these ideas, though, posing their own challenges to traditional religious values and traditions. Many are specifically focused, for example, on women's issues or rights as they are supported by the idea of individual worth or dignity, often explicitly evoking the idea that women be given full agency and humanity. An Arab America activist for Islamic women's rights, for

example, argues that she hopes to “be part of worldwide movements, wherever they are, to reclaim the rights that God promised us.” Another activist, a Black Quaker, echoes her ideas:

Because of coming from that place of seeing God in everyone, [my religion has] striven to make sure that they try to do that with women too, that they recognize the humanity and humility, that they recognize the traditional oppression and the long-term oppression under which they’ve operated.

Similarly, a minister and director of an organization that provides services to disadvantaged women argues strenuously that reproductive rights are also tied to individual worth, which requires that we trust women with their own choices. For her, this is the only way to allow women their full humanity. Her own denomination supports the legalization of abortion, and she argues,

It can only be the Holy Spirit that does this. Because every year, the following year, we go back to general assembly and try to undo what we did the year before. It’s just stupid. We have these wonderful, wonderful pronouncements, and then we get scared. Oh, my God. We’ve stepped over the line. We’re pro-choice. Do we really trust women to make these choices for themselves? Well, hell no. But the Holy Spirit has called us to do that clear through pregnancy. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the first trimester, second trimester, or third trimester. As a Presbyterian, we don’t take issue with that.

For this woman, her church’s support for linking reproductive rights with religious values is not unwavering, but her sense of the importance of basic worth and dignity as values demands that it continue.

As many of the above quotes show, most of the women interviewed articulate the idea of rights, worth, and dignity within the specific context of community and shared responsibility. This focus demands that the emphasis on rights not simply echo standard American political language that relies on those rights to demand equality and access to opportunity for all, but that it be supplemented by a sense of collective responsibility to contribute to improved well-being. These ideas are summed up well by one woman: “*Part of what you do is that you build community, that you recognize the sacredness of every person.*” In other words, it is precisely in building community that people rise to their full potential, through relationships and mutual engagement, rather than by focusing entirely on the idea of individual rights that should be demanded of government in competition with others. The idea of inherent worth, then, includes a sense that we all should work for those rights to be protected, in part because even if we are privileged, the disadvantage of others affects society as a whole.

In this sense, the rights-based language used by women working as religious social justice activists is distinct from the idea of individual rights used in U.S politics more broadly. It is given a more communal and contextual focus that links it integrally to the other values described in this chapter and the overall theme of this report: a

responsibility to live out faith in community, a belief in the basic value of love and compassion, and a sense of the interconnectedness of all people.

CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S VALUES, PUBLIC VISION, AND MORAL AGENCY

The four types of values outlined here—a hope to leave the world a better place, a belief in the mandate of love, peace, and compassion, a sense of interconnectedness, and a dedication to the basic worth and dignity of all people—are tied together by their link to community. Each set of values has a distinct orientation that draws women out of themselves and even their families: it requires that they work for the well-being of others, and particularly those who are disadvantaged in life.

Taken together, these values transform ideas about both rights and responsibilities to suggest that we violate our own worth and dignity, not to mention our well-being and social welfare, if we fail to recognize how we are interconnected. They constitute a vision of social welfare and community that insists that a rights-based focus on inequality cannot alone lead to dignity and justice for all. Rather, it has to be integrated with a sense of shared responsibility for working together on behalf of mutual well-being.

Importantly, in most cases the idea of rights is not presented in opposition to, or tension with, responsibility. Instead, both are part and parcel of one approach to building a just world. As a Catholic woman tied her values together, “A large part of how we deliver ourselves ties back to our faiths, and ties back to Catholic social values: dignity, respect, solidarity, we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, participation, community.”

By bringing together ideas about interconnectedness, compassion, stewardship, and dignity, the public vision of the women we interviewed recognizes that the individual welfare, worth, and dignity of each of us affect us all. Because we are connected, and because our lives are embedded in relationships with each other and our broader communities, we all benefit from the well-being of others. By working to reduce inequality and fighting for justice, not only do the disadvantaged gain better lives, but we all gain better communities.

The public vision of the women we interviewed also relocates many “private sphere” values to give them moral authority and importance in the public sphere. Again, this is not meant to imply that women intrinsically hold these values, or that they are by nature more relational, less competitive, or less dedicated to the idea of rights. Rather, because women’s lives and experiences are more closely tied to the family sphere, both philosophically and, for many, in practice, their lives are more closely associated with those values. Thus it is not surprising that women would see those values as politically important.

These values are in some ways nothing new. They reflect in many ways a history of women’s activism around social welfare issues in the United States over the past two centuries, understood for many white and African American activists as a fight for morality based on religious values that instilled a sense of responsibility for others

(Buchanan 1996; Higginbotham 1993; Skocpol 1992). Importantly, by justifying their activism with these values, women in the 19th and 20th centuries appropriated them in a radical way, claiming moral authority and agency for themselves (Buchanan 1996). They used these values to give their work authority and moral power: “Women reformers across the political and religious spectrum used religious authority as both guide and shield in their efforts to claim the right to shape public reality” (Buchanan 1996, 141).

The women interviewed in this project are in some ways doing something similar, but in others they are building on history in important ways. Certainly, the fight over women’s moral agency and authority is not won. Women’s roles remain controversial and polarizing in American society, politics, and religious life. But the women we interviewed are asserting their ability to think and speak as authorities in morality and politics. They can pinpoint their basic religious values, and they feel comfortable applying them not just to their private lives but to their public activism (even if they do not always feel comfortable talking about them publicly, as discussed below). They, too, claim moral agency and authority for their own, using it to demand the right to create and promote their own public vision.

The women we interviewed also describe an approach to morality that acknowledges how responsibility and connectedness, when recognized together with a focus on rights and dignity, might transform concepts of moral values. Many social reformers of the early 20th century, both male and female, treated poor women with a sense of disapproval and moral judgment that is echoed today in discussions of single welfare mothers: condemnation of what are seen as poor moral values, particularly when women break out of traditional roles and strictures for women (e.g., Gordon 1994; Wilkinson 1999). The combined ideas of interconnectedness and dignity, though, suggest a different way to approach morality, one that understands how larger contexts constrain choices and can be, themselves, immoral, particularly when they deny agency and authority to some by privileging the experiences of others. That is, “moral values” should work on behalf of the dignity and worth of all people by acknowledging the ways that our interconnectedness can both constrain and enable us to achieve real agency—without which, “morality” means very little.

Women, who have historically been among those traditionally denied access to choice and opportunity as well as moral agency, have experienced this dynamic—but have also frequently promoted the very “moral values” that limit their moral authority. The vision suggested by the social justice activists we interviewed, though, calls for an understanding of morality, and moral values, that does not privilege the experiences or lives of one group of people over another. Instead, they integrate ideas about rights and responsibilities, dignity and connectedness, in an alternative approach to morality and moral values.

“A Long Time Coming”: *Limitations on Women’s Public Voice*

The women we interviewed for this study are, as a group, confident in their values and commitment to working in community. They are passionate and principled about their activism, active in their communities, and engaged in public roles of varying visibility. Many are involved directly in advocacy or other political work.

At the same time, many of the women interviewed have either experienced or observed a hesitation by women in taking on a public voice of leadership, in religion, politics, or both. This hesitation can be thought of as a legacy of historical and continuing limitations on women’s public roles, particularly as moral authorities or political leaders.

This chapter outlines the ways that women talk about their hesitation to take on a public voice. It also gives examples of how women have overcome their hesitation to take on moral authority to claim religious and political leadership. Our findings underscore the work that needs to be done to inspire women to promote their sense of public vision. They also point to potential directions for pursuing that work—that is, for encouraging women to take on public roles in religious and political life.

HESITATION AND RESISTANCE

A majority of the women we spoke with articulate some kind of hesitation about taking on a public role, usually because of a fear of being visibly in leadership, a worry about their competence, or discomfort leading men. Some women describe seeing this hesitation in others and worrying about it, but many more report feeling it themselves.

A white mainline Protestant describes a long process of overcoming her fears: “It’s been a long time in coming. I wasn’t always tremendously self-confident, and it took many years to feel like—okay, I know what I’m doing [laughs] and I think I can handle this.”

An African American Christian says that she continues to be intimidated in her work: “I have felt a little uneasy. And I’m usually uneasy about—I would say, shy about talking about certain things. [Speaking in public]—that’s just intimidation for me. That’s just something probably from my past or whatever. Just holding me back.”

An Asian American Hindu is also worried about taking on leadership: “In the beginning I can honestly say I was really afraid, just of taking on a leadership role. I haven’t naturally been a leader. It’s not naturally something that comes to me. And so I was always like, oh my God—I’m going to be a community organizer, oh my God—do I know what I’m doing, do I know this, do I know that.”

A white Christian evangelical fears that she had less to offer than her male colleague and boss, the founder of her group: “[Our director is] really intimidating. In the sense that he’s really smart, I mean. How can I add something to that? That’s the feeling that I came in with. And so it’s taken me awhile to get to a place where I’m like oh, yeah. I can add something to that theoretically and academically and that kind of thing.”

A Latina Catholic describes still feeling intimidated, despite years of activism: “It took a long time for me to get to this place, and I have to say that I’m still uncomfortable in this space of being at the front.”

As the quotes above suggest, for many women, the hesitation comes from a sense that they are not competent enough to do the work. They do not feel the right to a public voice, because they may not be able to do it justice. It is easy to see how this feeling could stem from an underlying sense that women are not appropriate for public roles, or for taking a public voice, precisely because they do not bring the “natural” qualities needed for those roles, including the moral authority to do so. As a result, a lot of practice and encouragement is necessary to build the self-confidence to be public figures, in politics or religion.

A few women consciously recognize the roots of their hesitation, acknowledging that they were raised not to take on a public role, but rather to defer more to male leadership. An Asian American Buddhist describes her obstacles as a Japanese woman:

It goes against the nature of the way I was raised [laughs]. So it’s something I’ve had to overcome, but I think, as I’ve gotten older and more involved in things and been the person who’s supposed to give the talk, that you gain a lot more confidence. And it becomes more enjoyable.... But I think girls and then Japanese people are supposed to be more reserved, and it’s always supposed to be self-deprecating....

A Latina Catholic recounts her own experience growing up:

I remember my father saying to me, ‘You don’t even look at someone eye to eye. It’s disrespectful. You know, you lower your sight, you don’t stare at someone.’ So, the whole idea that I would be taught how to confront someone was terrifying.

While women from all races and religions express their hesitation to take leadership, women of color note that their lack of confidence and socialization not to lead are rooted not only in gender but in race or ethnicity. Many were actively discouraged, especially as youth, from taking a visible role in their community in part to avoid attention from those outside the community, based on a fear of the

negative consequences of that attention. Women from immigrant backgrounds—including the last two quoted above, a Latina woman whose parents immigrated from Mexico, and an Asian American whose parents were put in internment camps during World War II—express this idea. So do African American women, who note that their community's fear of violent retribution kept many from participating in political events. The legacy of these experiences, they say, was taught to them as demanding that they stay, to some degree, out of sight. Many women of color also note that racial and ethnic factors are compounded by a sense that as women they should not overshadow or confront men in their communities, both out of respect for traditional roles and to avoid embarrassing their communities in their fight for equality. For these women, the hesitation to take on a public voice of authority comes with restrictions and disincentives from many sources.

Even when women themselves don't feel a hesitation to take on a public role, many have noticed other women having a hard time taking on leadership. A Latina Catholic, for example, notices this dynamic among the low-income Latinas she mobilizes:

Even though they understand about advocacy and they're committed to the issue, they've been reticent to do advocacy work. They've been very gung ho on the education piece, on the forums, doing things like getting proclamations, resolutions, things like that. But in terms of the energy and the comfort to put themselves out there and advocate, it's been less. And so yeah, I've wondered about that.

A white mainline Protestant sees a similar hesitation among women in her group: "They don't want to bow to the men. They're too enlightened for that, but I see women hesitating to stick their—to go out on a limb much more, I think, than men."

A Black Quaker attributes the hesitation to socialization, particularly around politics:

A lot of women don't have the level of confidence or even the socialization that men have had around how to be in the world, and putting that energy out and being assertive and confrontive—we haven't been socialized in that way. And that then doesn't lend itself to, 'So we're going up to Washington on Thursday, we're going to the Capitol Building and we're going to lobby'.... It doesn't lend itself to that because we're socialized to be nurturers, to be non-confrontive, and so it's operating outside of our realm of our comfort zone.

A white mainline Protestant has seen women defer to men as well:

I think sometimes there was a lowering of energy by the women because of the men who were there. I wouldn't say that was animosity.... You see the men starting to take over and the women just start to be quiet. Yeah, or to not engage in the same way—I think there is a way in which you just say, 'Okay, well if they're going to do it, fine.'

A white evangelical Christian sees differences in how women and men approach both leadership and insecurity:

I would say 60 or 70 percent of the young women that I have mentored over a period of time who came into the organization were afraid of public speaking, were afraid of standing up and doing things, were fine to do things one-on-one, were not all that comfortable in doing cold calls.... The young men think they know it all [laughs]. I will have young men who know absolutely nothing come to me and say, 'I could go do presentations for the organization.' And I think to myself, oh, Lord help us, right [laughs]? In fact, the biggest problem I find with young men is often this misplaced confidence. Now, I don't think they really have it but what they do is, when they're not all that confident, is they do this I-know-everything kind of stuff, in a way that you just want to slap them upside the head, you know [laughs]? And women don't do that. Women will be, 'Oh, I don't know anything, I couldn't possibly do that.'

For some women, taking on a public voice specifically involves overcoming a need to be perfect. As an African American Christian says, for example,

That was one of the things that kept me from thinking that I could be a minister, because I thought I had to be perfect, but I knew I wasn't, and at least I'm honest with myself, that I knew that I could never be. But I thought that the others were. And then, when I thought that they weren't, and they couldn't be, then it got to be a little bit okay.

A white evangelical Christian describes both feeling and observing the perfectionist tendency and its consequences:

I mean, that is, in fact, a huge problem with a lot of women who are very good—is that they have these perfectionist tendencies where they want and feel like they need to perfect and, in our work, we do not have time for that. We just don't, you know? You've got to do a good job, you've got to work hard, you've got to try your hardest. But you can't be perfect. You're going to make yourself and the rest of us crazy if you try to be perfect. And that is a woman's thing, right? To try and work so hard to be—make everything absolutely perfect. Try hard, do your best and say, okay, all right, so I kind of screwed that up.

The need for perfection is not surprising in the context of the experiences of women, and particularly women of color. These women can be seen as compensating for the assumed moral deficiencies that they have as religious and political authorities. If they are perfect, they cannot be criticized as not having the authority to act in a public role. So it becomes a paralyzing problem, because no one, of course, can be perfect.

With some exception, in most of the above quotes the hesitation to take on a public role is fairly generic, tied with leadership in general rather than politics

or religion in particular. A few women, though, specifically tie their hesitation to discomfort with taking a public role in a religious setting. A particularly compelling story of this discomfort is told by an Arab American Muslim who was asked to speak in front of her mosque during her campaign for local political office. As a candidate, she clearly felt at least some comfort taking on a public voice, but in this situation she was intimidated by the religious setting:

I don't know if you're familiar with a mosque, but generally you have an imam in the front who leads the prayer, and everybody sits, the men and the women behind.... The mic is in the front. So when the politicians came, they all wanted to be there because there's about a thousand people that pray at the mosque on Fridays. So, what they would do is take the politician up to the front to the mic to give their little spiel. So you have about a thousand people there watching them. So one by one they would come in. Well, I was running, so they asked me to go up there, or they didn't ask, but that was the procedure. And I, for all that I'm outspoken and everything, I didn't want to go up there, because it breaks—it's a tradition, it's a line that you can't really cross. I don't know what the feeling was exactly, but it was a really weird thing. But my husband took my arm and pulled me to the front, which is very symbolic as well, and made me stand there and gave me the mic. Now all the men are in front of me and all the women are behind, and I'm standing in the place where the imam stands. And I'm talking, and it's interesting because there's a Muslim, but they wanted me to do it because I was running for office. And then I realized what I was doing and the thing is, when I'm sitting back there when I hear politicians speak, I get mad, because they're interfering with the spirituality of why you're there. So when I finished, I said, I am so sorry for standing up here and interrupting your prayer, because I know what that is. And here I am as a woman with many people who are conservative, they really are conservative. And I have no problem confronting them. But to be in their face like that, to me it felt uncomfortable. And later, I had some people come up to me, and some of them that I know very well, they said, I was really surprised that you went up and did that. They thought that I would have more deference. And in a sense it hurt me. It was such a small thing, it was a five minute little thing, but in a sense it hurt me that I did it. I don't know how to explain it beyond that... But then my husband and some of the men were saying, no, no, there's no reason for you to feel uncomfortable, everybody else is doing it, and you were in the same boat, you shouldn't feel uncomfortable at all. And it was the men. And it's also the men who approached me about running and doing stuff. But as a man, I don't think they understand the same things that go on in your mind. And as women we always say, what are people going to think of me, are people going to like me? You can't get rid of that.

This woman considers herself an advocate for women's rights in Islam, attends a mosque that she describes as supportive of women's leadership, and has a long history of activism and public voice. Yet in this religious setting, she felt that she had taken on an inappropriate role—being an authority in that setting intimidated her.

Similarly, another woman, whose story of resisting her calling is told earlier in the report, asserts that in part her concern was related to being a woman:

Q: Have you ever experienced difficulty taking leadership as a woman?

A: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, absolutely... fighting the call to leadership, I think because there's no going back and everything is out in the open. Where do you go? My husband says I never go anywhere—I can go to someplace that I've never been, and either I meet somebody or I have an encounter like I know somebody, he says. So it's that you don't go back, there's no retreat.

Q: Do you think it's harder for women to embrace that?

A: Yeah. I think sometimes we want somebody to take care of us. Right? But in leadership, particularly in a lead role, that's not something you can afford. You can't even afford to be too emotional because they will mistake that for weakness, so that the passion that people have most often seen from me is anger. And that's the difficult part about being a woman, because being a strong woman—it's the typical thing. People get labeled. You're either the B word or the W word. But I think I got over that a long time ago.

For this woman, the anticipation of being vulnerable and even attacked led to her hesitation to lead. Again, this reflects a lack of confidence in being an authority, at least in the early stages of claiming leadership.

In many ways, women's fear of taking on authority in this way is not unjustified. In our interviews, women who have done so describe attacks they were subjected to, and some describe pulling back from public roles as a way to sustain the necessary energy for their activist work. One, a white minister involved in religious activism on behalf of prostitutes' rights, describes her strategy:

I have to pace myself with that stuff, because I can only stand to be beaten up, verbally accosted, once about every six weeks. It takes me that long to regain my equilibrium. So knowing that that's volatile, and that there may be a very intense negative reaction to me. Of course, I know I've hit a nerve, and they're not going to forget me. But I have to be very careful how much of that I put out there, because it's going to come back at me. Backlash being what it is.

Of course, this woman is threatening women's roles in religion and politics in very clear ways. She is advocating for the rights of women who most people see as among the most desperate and immoral around, and she is doing so as a woman minister.

Her work crosses a variety of boundaries related to moral and religious authority, and so attacks on her work are not unexpected. At the same time, she is by no means the only woman who describes feeling this way. Many others do as well, describing a lower level of respect for their authority, particularly on religious issues. A Muslim woman fighting for women's rights describes it this way:

I've been yelled at and screamed at and insulted before, mostly by Muslims, and sometimes my skin is not as thick as it should be. And my mentor is always getting after me about it, and I'm like, 'Oh Lord! From my own people' [laughs].

Many women argue that men and male leaders cannot empathize with the hesitation women have in taking on a public voice of authority. In fact, women involved in groups led by men often express frustration that the specific issues facing women were not addressed or discussed as part of training or other programs, even when critiquing other power dynamics. This can be limiting for them. One woman clergy, who expresses this frustration in describing her past experiences with a community-based interfaith group, notes why and how she has begun encouraging women's voice in her current work, now in a denominational women's office:

Many women are working to overcome proscriptions limiting their leadership, both in religion and politics. Their personal hesitations to claim religious or political authority are often linked to ideological limitations on that authority for women and people of color.

I think it has to do with public and private voice, because most of the people in churches, black and white, are women, most people doing the work in the churches are women, but ... a lot of the leadership in a public way is men. And I wonder if in an organization like [ours, women's hesitation] has to do with women needing to make a leap into the public sphere and to having their private voice become a public voice, and that's a hard leap to make. Some of the work that we're doing [in my office] is trying to get more women's voices out there just to talk [about] ... this whole question of having your commitment to God, to put it in basic language, or your religious zeal or your religious commitment, be the thing that impassioned you to a public voice. And I think that people haven't made that leap quite yet. I also think that because that voice—if it's a woman's voice, it's a voice that brings with it often what have been considered private concerns. And so to make those private concerns and that private voice around school, food, all of that stuff, a public voice is the leap that hasn't—that's what is trying to be made ... and when men are a part of those organizations that particular kind of voice doesn't get heard as much.

This woman sums up well a key issue for women working on social justice issues within religious institutions. Many are working to overcome proscriptions limiting

their leadership, both in religion and politics. Their personal hesitations to claim religious or political authority are linked to ideological limitations on that authority for women and people of color. And when women bring their private experiences to the public realm, they are even more suspect and sense that this contribution is considered less relevant and important to public life. Finding their public voice in this context is extremely difficult, particularly for women of color, whose experiences are shaped and public voice is limited by race and ethnicity as well as by gender.

ENCOURAGING WOMEN'S PUBLIC VOICE

Although the majority of women doing social justice activism describe a hesitation to claim public authority and leadership, most had overcome it on some level. The last few women quoted above, for example, point to strategies they used or experienced as helping them to claim a public voice. The women we interviewed point to a variety of ways that they overcame their hesitations to lead. Most of the strategies they describe can be grouped together in four main categories: passion, experience, training or mentoring, and role modeling.

The first way that women are encouraged to take on a public voice at first seems straightforward: women are motivated to activism simply because they feel passionately about the injustices they see. As one says, “I found that if I was mad enough about something, I didn’t think about being shy. I just thought about articulating what it was that we needed to articulate, and that’s what change work is.” Another woman puts it this way: “The way we take leadership is in the things that we have a very high, personal interest at stake. Because that’s what you’re comfortable with. That’s what comes from your gut.”

In the context of the passion and intensity that women use to describe their values to us, this factor might be expected to motivate the majority of women to overcome any hesitation they have to take on leadership. In our interviews, though, women rarely feel that their passion was enough. In fact, of the women who articulate a hesitation to take on leadership, only a handful identify this as the main way they overcame it. Instead, they mostly point to the importance of experience, personal skills development, training, or role modeling provided by their organization.

Experience was one of the most common ways that women came to claim a public voice. Many women describe starting off without much confidence in their activism, and as time went on getting more involved and more comfortable. The following is a fairly typical description:

In the beginning I can honestly say I was really afraid.... [But this work] really forced me to go out into the community, and really become active and talk to the community, and sharpen my own skills and my own capacity for dealing with different people on a day to day basis—just dealing with different problems as they arise. And so in the first year I really just focused my efforts, just working on different events, working directly with the community, and doing a lot of simple exposure. And

in the next year I'm going to be doing a lot more presentations, and organizing, and getting people more active in town halls and everything.... I would say that it has given me a lot of confidence, and given me a lot of knowledge.

Many women report experiencing this kind of growth, becoming gradually more confident through the simple work of becoming more visible, especially as they developed a sense of their own abilities and knowledge.

A more targeted way for women to develop their confidence and sense of authority is through their own skills development, and many women describe exploiting opportunities to do so through classes or individual attempts to gain skills and knowledge. This personal growth took many forms: public speaking classes, reading around the issues they work on, or targeted individual skills development. The women who describe these strategies deliberately worked to develop their confidence, by focusing on specific areas where they felt they needed work.

Perhaps the most commonly identified way for women to develop a sense of authority within their activist work, though, is through training and mentoring, particularly when these

experiences address issues distinct to women's lives. In many organizations, people are trained for organizing, advocacy, or service provision, and

Only in rare cases does the training provided by groups focus on gender, and in some cases women are frustrated with that. When groups do focus on gender, though, women find it empowering and inspiring.

some of the training involves developing critical skills such as analyzing power relationships. Some even involve specifically religious training, focused on interpreting scripture or religious traditions in support of the work groups are doing.

This training can be crucial to women claiming a voice, because it provides a concentrated and purposeful opportunity for them to get the kinds of experiences and exposure that lend them confidence, as well as to develop specific skills to point to as their own. It can thus be an emotionally safer and quicker way to gain the same kind of confidence that experience gives. In addition, when it provides a place to talk about power and power relationships, training can open women to the idea that they can claim that power, and can teach them how to use it. As a woman quoted earlier notes, "[Through the training,] I got clarity that the power did not come from [the organization], but [the organization] taught me how to use it. So I came back from training and I just began to do quite miraculous things."

Only in rare cases does the training provided by groups focus on gender, and in some cases (as noted above) women are frustrated with that. When groups do focus on gender, though, women find it empowering and inspiring. The director of one organization describes her work doing both group and individual trainings to develop comfort with leadership among former welfare recipients who are African American. She focuses in part on unpacking the various forms of oppression these women feel as low-income African American women, while also providing skills

development for jobs. She deliberately recruits such women to volunteer and staff her organization, with the goal of developing their leadership skills. She is keenly aware of how important this work can be, since she was first uncomfortable with leadership herself:

We have wanted to help women be able to have a transformation of their capacity to be leaders, because oftentimes it's viewed that men need to be in charge. And me being the woman in charge, I've had to deal with some male sass—not so much anymore, but in my earlier years I had to get comfortable with myself, first of all because I think in my own head, men were supposed to be in charge.

Several of the women who benefited from this training describe how important her leadership has been in developing theirs. As one says,

When you're on welfare, I keep saying, it seems like a no-win situation. And when you have somebody to come and tell you, you can do this in spite of—And that's the most significant part of her, that's foremost in my brain, her telling me you can do this. And it's like—I worked for H&R Block, so she was like, so you did taxes? Okay. So you can be our bookkeeper. And I'm like, well, no. I haven't done anything like bookkeeping. And she was like, no, then you can learn this. So she got her bookkeeper that she had hired to train me to do financial forms and stuff. And so I was like, are you sure? She's like no, you can do this. You can do this. And I was like, oh, my God. What am I getting into? But as I took a little training, I started to come up—like, that's all there is to fill out this form?

In this case, the training and mentoring was not even about public speaking or voice per se, but it still helped a woman feel more comfortable and confident. This particular woman also began, as a result, to participate in some political events and advocacy organized by her group. Another woman at her organization describes her own developing confidence, particularly in the experience of going through training with people from different backgrounds:

Most of the community organizers that come to our organization have college degrees, but they come here and they have issues, too. Many have issues that are very similar to others, meaning that they may have a degree, but they are looking for jobs and need help to make ends meet until they find a job in the field of work that they went to school for. In my own opinion there are people who come in who have good jobs or nice cars, and you look at them and start feeling like, okay they may sometimes think that they are better than you are. And it's not until you learn different kinds of things about that individual, and you don't gloat about it, it just lets you know that people are people and sometimes we come with some of the same baggage, no matter what fabric you are cut from.

The same woman notes that the training she received within her activist group taught her to tap into her own strength by helping her recognize the values of her experiences:

Fear plays a big part in our everyday life. You feel that you may not say all the right things, or know everything, or somebody may ask you something and you don't know it. But one thing you can count on is the lived experiences that you have inside of you. The best part is not forgetting your story but how you can learn from it.

Mentoring is another way that women develop confidence, and it is a way that many women leaders specifically try to encourage leadership in younger women. Most of the women leaders we spoke to describe some kind of mentoring relationship, with men or women mentors who encouraged them to take a public voice. They tried to pass this kind of experience on to other women—both younger women and their colleagues. One, an African American Christian minister, describes how she hopes to encourage women's public voice:

I'm thinking right now in terms of one of our top leaders, a white female Lutheran that I'm just very proud of. She's doing a fantastic job and I agitate her quite a bit. Well, when I see her retreating to her little safe place to let men—not to hurt a man's ego or something, I talk to her one on one, not embarrass her because I don't do that, and I review with her what she's done and ask her, what's it going to take for her stop giving her power away. And we have a little understanding, and she says okay, thank you, I appreciate that you brought that to my attention.

Both men and women can mentor, of course. One woman speaks of her relationship with a male religious leader who not only encouraged her leadership development but also convinced her that women can and should be religious clergy. Another describes being literally pushed in front of news cameras by a male mentor when she hesitated to talk to the press. At the same time, many women speak of how important having women in political and particularly religious leadership can be to encouraging women to take on a public voice themselves. Several note that bringing more women into leadership positions attracted more women as volunteer activists to their organizations, and others describe their ability as women to identify where women may need particular supports. In contrast, most of the male leaders we interviewed say they rarely see any issues with women taking on leadership, which could of course speak to their ability as leaders to overcome any issues women might have—or, alternatively, could suggest that their own experiences make it difficult to see what those issues might be.

One woman tells a particularly compelling story of her work developing a leadership training program for women in her organization, which supports community organizing efforts. Her story is interesting because she describes a program designed to train women, to address the specific obstacles they have to taking on leadership and public voice, and to reclaim religious values and traditions

from women's perspectives. By doing so, the program was able to do more than just develop women as leaders: it also dipped into their individual passions to provide a new impetus for them to act. Interestingly, the program was developed in spite of the original belief of its eventual leader, quoted below, that women did not need special supports and training. She was convinced to start the training anyway by other women in the organization. Her story is long but included at length here, because it powerfully describes what training targeted at women can do.

I was the first woman trainer that [my group] had. And women would complain about me. And they would come up to and complain to my face. And their complaint was—I remember one woman saying to me, 'You talk like a man, and you think like a man, and you train like a man.' And I said, 'Well, you know, it's primarily been men who have mentored me, and so yeah I'm not surprised.' 'When is the woman in you going to come out?' and I said, 'What the hell is she talking about?'

I did a training about six months later, and this young African American woman came out of the session. I left them to do an exercise for 15 minutes. And she followed me out and she said, 'I can't do this exercise.' I said, 'Why not?' And she said—it was a stick person where you had to describe your life, all the various elements in your life, you know, what you did with, you know, your family, your community, your church—and she said, 'I don't have anything.' 'What do you mean you don't have anything?' So I sat her down and began to ask her. And she had tons of stuff. She was the chairman of the resident counsel of the building she lived in, in public housing. She was a volunteer with the Head Start program. But she was devaluing all of that. It wasn't important.

And I remember coming out of that session, and I said to my husband [and director of her group], 'You know, this keeps happening to me.' And he said, 'When are you going to do something about this?' 'What the heck can I do?' 'You got to think of something. You're the woman trainer here. You got to think of something.' And I'm just sitting around.

So, one day I got together a group of the women organizers. None of them would train. I was the only one who would train, and there was had a handful, maybe five or six of us. And I got them together and we began to talk about whether this was only my experience or what they were hearing. And they were hearing the same thing, that it was a very male-dominated methodology, that it didn't speak to women. So what could we do? So we designed a little ... kind of a retreat to try to get a handle on this...

[After the retreat,] I looked at the whole retreat and I said this was good, but far from the excellence I expected. The women evaluated it, both in writing and as a group, and it was like the most incredible experience they had ever had in their lives. And I'm, like, why is there

this difference between me and them? And I think what happened is the acknowledgement that they had a private space, a place that was for them. I think that was very, very important. And secondly, that all remnants of [our old] training were absent. It was gone.

And the way I did that is I asked different small teams of women, ‘Would you take care of the opening piece? Would you take care of the closing piece?’ So we had a lot of little tiny communities working on things and the women, and they would call me. They’d say, ‘What exactly do you want me to do?’ And I’d say ‘You have to do something creative that allows people to be introduced to one another and learn just a little bit about each other.’ Or I’d say, ‘At the ending you have to tie up everything that’s happened in the two days, you know, when people leave that they feel like there was a conclusion.’ And so the women, they brought in candles, books, photographs, ribbons. They set up the tables in circles. They just did the craziest stuff I had never seen. They brought in stones; they brought in all kinds of things, mementos from their grandmothers. And we’re working in these rooms, and I’m saying what room am I in, you know? This is a strange place.

The first session a woman brought about 50 yards of ribbon that must have been three inches wide. And she draped it everywhere. It was over chairs under tables, just everywhere. And she said all weekend I want to invite people to write on the ribbon. Right. So no one understood it, but by the end of the weekend, the ribbon was full with people’s reflections. And at the beginning, what they did, just to give you an example, is this leader passed around a tiny basket with little pieces of string. And this is the introductory piece. We all stood in a circle, and I didn’t know what they were doing, but she passed around this little basket of string and she asked each one of us to take a piece of string and we each took it. And then she asked us to introduce ourselves and tell what we felt tied to. Well, the introductions took an hour and a half. Some people were in tears, some people were laughing. And then at the end of the retreat two days later, they took the ribbon, this long piece of ribbon, and they draped it all around, they tied all the women together with the ribbon. And then they took a scissor, and they gave it to the first woman, and in departing, you had to cut a piece of ribbon, and then you had to tell everyone what you were going to cut out of your life that was keeping you from being who you wanted to be. Well, we spent another two hours saying goodbye and hearing these.

So these were so new to me, right? This is different. This is ... not the agitation, the confrontation, all this stuff I had been trained to do. But this was deep, you know. And in between, there was just tremendous—they did role plays, they did a redefinition of power and self-interest from a

woman's perspective, public and private from a woman's perspective, what women bring to the public arena that never gets acknowledged either in the training or in the way we do the actual actions.

It just took off.... And within three years, 50 percent of all the presidents in [the group] became women. And suddenly, I wasn't the only trainer. There were ten women training.... If you ask [our director] today, has the training changed in the last 20 years, he'd say absolutely. And if you asked him what was the major change, he would say the women who began to train....

The other thing that's interesting about it is—we do a lot of role playing. And some of the role playing we do is scripturally based, because despite the fact that in the times when scripture was written, it was not politically savvy to acknowledge women, there are some pretty substantial, powerful women in scripture. And so, we playact those women. And I'll never forget, the first time we did it, we used Rosa Parks. And we actually had someone act the role of Rosa Parks. And the group had to do some reflection and some reading on Rosa Parks and say, what was going on and what would I want to know if Rosa Parks came in the room and I had a chance to interview her. What would I want to know about her? And it's very interesting the questions they were asking Rosa Parks when she came into the room. They wanted to know, How did your husband react to your activism? What happened to you when they actually arrested you? What happened to your family? How were they impacted? These are the things that they were wrestling with. How was your family impacted? What reputation did you have after you were released? What did people say about you? So they weren't asking, Did the police beat you up? You know, Did you have to go to court? What was that like? Who defended you publicly? They weren't asking the public questions. They were asking very much the private questions. And so we just said, 'Whoa, God, this is interesting.' So then we went into Esther, and Ruth, and Magdalene, and all these women that they were pulling out of scripture. And very fascinating questions that these women asked them.

This woman's experience describes the best outcome that we can hope for: women claiming a public voice that demands recognition of their lives and experiences. Her experience points to several components of successfully encouraging them to do so, including providing a space that recognizes women's values and visions, allowing women to draw on the emotional center of their work and values, and asking women to themselves design efforts to encourage their political voice.

Importantly, the same leader describes a hope that the progress of women in her organization will also change the issues that it addresses:

We still have a long way to go. I mean, my constant agitation to the women is, when is your stuff going to get on the table, the issue table? Every

time I hear the issue platform, it's always male stuff: violence, housing, land development, transportation systems. Those are the things men think about. But the things that women have to struggle with—the care of elderly parents, the quality of schools, whether there are Head Start programs for working parents or working mothers, single mothers—all of those, health care—those issues are not getting on the table.

The experience described by this woman also points to something interesting about women's leadership: women often feel a responsibility to support other women through the kinds of training and mentoring programs described. In this, there is perhaps hope for more women claiming moral, religious, and political authority in order to advance their public vision. Women can support each other in this endeavor.

This brings us to the last way that women consistently describe being motivated to take on a public role: through the example of role models in visible women leaders of religious justice groups. Women's leadership itself seems to give other women the confidence to take on more public roles, by the very implication that women can successfully claim authority. In fact, in the organizations where we interviewed women for this study, there was an interesting pattern: where women were leaders, higher proportions of women worked as staff or volunteers.

The importance of women as role models is particularly important to the young women interviewed in this study. Many who worked closely with women leaders speak with a sense of awe about them as models to live up to, and they repeatedly express a thankfulness that they were working with such women. Some had sought out opportunities to do so. They describe the qualities these women bring to leadership as traits they hope to develop and emulate in themselves. They are often particularly impressed by how women leaders negotiate in mostly male contexts and bring their own styles of leadership to them. As an example, one young woman describes the woman leader of her organization, a labor organizer, as working very well in the masculine context of unions. As she notes,

It's not just about power and saying, this is what we can bring to the table. It's also a relationship that's to be built on a personal as well as professional level that I think most people overlook. It makes it hard to work on campaigns, because you don't necessarily understand the nuances of what's going on politically with the labor unions. And she can circumvent all of that, because she intentionally makes those relationships.... Being strong and capable women, sometimes you have to push the envelope [laughs], and just say, you don't have to beat around the bush, we just need to get this going. And I think [she] has a way of doing that.

This woman respects her group's leader in part precisely because she is bringing the kinds of values that women throughout this report hold dear—the importance of mutuality and relationships, for example—to her male-dominated world. Many young women speak in similar terms about their role models, women who claim

leadership and also bring their own values, often what might be called women's values, to the work.

Women working in leadership positions recognize the role modeling they do, and many provide the kinds of mentoring and support services described above. It is not an accident, for example, that a woman was approached by her colleagues to help design a training for women. She was likely seen as more potentially receptive and accountable for that kind of work, and her reaction shows that this assumption was on target—she did have a sense of responsibility to other women. Other women—again, many women of color—also observe the importance of their work as leaders.

A Hispanic mainline Protestant, for example, describes the importance of women's leadership in empowering other women:

I think that there's still a certain amount of intimidation that women may feel stepping up to the plate, for whatever reason, but not with us. And I suspect it's because we're a very egalitarian organization, and because we're dominated heavily by women. Really, who else is going to step up to the plate?

A Hispanic Catholic sees her role as a model for other Latinas:

They continually point to me. It's how students will point to their teacher. You know they have a great admiration for their teacher, and it's that same dynamic, in that they're recognizing that they have potential, and that I recognize their potential, and the fact that they can identify with me as opposed to one of the male staff. They hold onto that because I reflect them, they reflect me. It also points to the lack of women's leadership—certainly not the lack of potential, but the lack of actual women's leadership. So you find one, right?

An Arab American Muslim describes the impact of her leadership in the larger community:

People were thankful that I was out there speaking in the public eye on behalf of Muslim women. I would even have fathers coming up to me, saying you're a role model for my daughter, which made me feel very uncomfortable [laughs]. I don't consider myself role model material. But, you know, it added a lot more pressure, because I would realize more and more how much weight I carried on my shoulders, or what a large responsibility—what a big burden it is to what you say publicly. How you act publicly makes such a big difference. So as much as it made me feel a lot more responsible, I think it made women a lot more enthusiastic and a lot more hopeful about change, too.

Most of the women leaders we interviewed articulate the sense of responsibility to other women that these three women do. They understand how difficult it is to battle restrictions on their activism and leadership, and they recognize the hesitation to take on a public voice.

In recognizing the importance of their role as models and mentors, women leaders provide hope that they can help build a critical mass of women working as moral, religious, and political authorities. Many existing women leaders of religious, and particularly interfaith, social justice groups are forging a new path for women's public roles in religious and political life. As they provide the kinds of mentoring and training that can encourage younger women to follow in their footsteps and beyond, and as young women themselves gain experience and build their own skills, together these generations can challenge traditional ideas, often based in concepts of religious morality, about what women can and should contribute to public life.

Transforming Politics As We Know Them: Implications for Politics, Religion, and Feminism

Women religious activists around social justice issues are creating and promoting a distinct public vision for American politics and society. Their focus on stewardship, compassion, individual dignity, and interconnectedness as political values challenge basic ideas about the roles of individuals and government in American society and transform concepts of rights, public life, and social policy. In other words, women's public vision could transform politics as we know them. There is special potential, though, for the ideas of religious women activists to revitalize three institutions in particular: progressive politics, religious institutions, and women's movements. All three have goals in common with the women interviewed and are potential allies in their work; in some cases there are already connections between them. And all three would benefit from the ideas and energy that the women we interviewed could contribute.

Two of these institutions—progressive politics and religious institutions—are still dominated by men and male authority. The women we interviewed can help each understand how to more fully integrate and genuinely promote women's voices and leadership in their work, which in turn could motivate new strategies and policies based on the distinct perspectives contributed by women, particularly on behalf of disadvantaged communities. Recognizing women's full authority would probably also bring new energy and support to each institution.

Building relationships between religious social justice organizations—particularly interfaith groups led by women—and women's groups could energize policy change on behalf of underprivileged Americans as well. Many people have criticized the women's movement for not having achieved social, political, and economic change for the most disadvantaged Americans. While the issues facing these communities have been on the agendas of many women's organizations, those that have tried to promote them have not had much success in this area and were even unable to prevent the loss of aid entitlements for poor women in recent years. New alliances with women in interfaith justice groups could contribute new perspectives on values and politics to the women's movement, broaden activist support for its work, and help achieve stronger policies designed to improve the well-being of all women.

This chapter summarizes the findings of our research about women's values

and visions and then considers how they might help revitalize politics, religion, and feminism. Its purpose is to inspire and encourage new thinking about ways to empower women's voices, both by redefining ideas about politics and morality, and by increasing women's activism and leadership.

WOMEN'S PUBLIC VALUES AND VISION: SUMMARY

The religious women activists we interviewed for our research have a lot to say about questions of moral agency, religious and political authority, and values. These women are actively claiming a public voice as political and religious leaders, based on their sense of individual and collective responsibility for their communities. They describe their sense of responsibility as a very personal calling from God, or a need to put their faith and values into action, which they hope to live out in public life.

The women we interviewed interpret their relationship with God in diverse ways, and those differences shape their approaches to issues of politics, morality, and social justice. Women who are active in conservative political work on cultural issues see their involvement as an effort to defend traditional moral standards on behalf of a loving but actively intervening God who holds us accountable for living up to those standards. In contrast, women who work on social welfare issues hope to serve a more nurturing and co-creative God through efforts to improve the well-being of individuals and communities, based on values that are focused on building relationships and bonds with others in recognition of the interconnectedness of the world. They use these values to inform their ideas about political rights, often linked to valuing the inherent worth and dignity of all people. In general, they recognize that rights are both individual and shared, and that rights must be understood within the context of a sense of shared responsibility in order to create fully inclusive economic and political systems.

Throughout our interviews, the themes of community, mutuality, and collective responsibility are repeated and underscored by almost all the women who participated. This theme reflects the values and traditions of their religious faiths, but it is reinterpreted and made relevant to public life by many of the women interviewed as they apply those values—often seen as more appropriate to the “private” sphere—to politics, policy, and civil society. They call for a new way of thinking about these institutions to incorporate a sense of responsibility that can supplement and redefine the traditional rights-based language used in public debate. They also ask for a new way of thinking about the relationships among government, civil society, and communities to incorporate more citizen involvement, from all sectors of society, in defining and promoting moral and political values and in promoting the well-being of communities.

Women's experiences and values are impacted as much by questions of race, ethnicity, religion, and class as by gender, with women of color, poor women, and women from smaller U.S. religions experiencing additional and qualitatively different restrictions on their own public roles in religion and politics. These differences change, exacerbate, and sometimes mitigate the gender-based restrictions that many

women experience as limitations on their moral agency. These other dimensions also define women's religious values, the goals of their activism, and the experiences they have in claiming a public voice. While in some ways these factors create more obstacles to women's leadership by contributing to their discomfort with taking a public role, in other ways they inspire women to act on behalf of the well-being of communities outside the mainstream, in reaction to the injustices they see.

REDEFINING PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

Since the 2004 elections, the debate over “moral values” has taken on a life of its own. Compelled by a sense that Americans, and particularly religious Americans, do not see the values underlying their policy positions, many progressive political leaders have worked to adopt values-based language into their arguments. Religious progressive leaders have also entered the fray, arguing that their own religious values are an alternative to the “core” values presented by conservative leaders. Many of these progressive leaders evoke some of the same values described by the women we interviewed, including a dedication to alleviating inequality, a responsibility to work for the poor and disadvantaged, and a devotion to the ideals of love and compassion. They, like the religious social justice activists we interviewed, describe a set of moral values that differs from the values promoted as “core moral values” among conservatives.

Efforts to bring these values into public life can be seen as a positive sign, a way to help religious progressives feel more included in political debate and life. Such efforts may invigorate an important base for policymaking around social justice, one that has often felt left out. Many of the women we talked to, for example, note that their religious motivations feel unwelcome in progressive politics (all of our interviews were done before the 2004 elections). Those motivations are important enough to them that they seek out religious settings in which to pursue them. In fact, women particularly value their religious social justice work because it can allow them to bridge the divide between politics and religion, giving them a sense of integration that they enjoy. A typical description, for example, comes from a white mainline Protestant:

My two lives, my political life and my religious life, just tracked along parallel lines, because there really wasn't any need to intermix the two. I was comfortable with both and we are very big in this community on separation of church and state. But an interesting thing happened when we joined [my church]. I discovered a number of folks whom I had known for years in the political milieu were members of [the church]. So it brought all these threads together. And it makes for a nice, well-integrated life.... Something will happen in the community, or of a political nature, that then gets reinforced or amplified in church [laughs] on Sunday. And so it is hard to separate the two, and I don't object to that. It's nice to be able to feel like my value systems are not in conflict with one another.”

This woman was recruited from her church into an interfaith social justice group. For her, the experience of publicly bringing together politics and religion came later in life, after many years of political participation. Once she found a place to combine the two explicitly in her activism, she was much more comfortable and felt more sustenance in her religious and political lives. It is important, though, that she did not find that comfort in a secular political organization, but rather in a religious one.

To the extent that the emerging debate over moral values incorporates the values described by women as important to their civic activism and political involvement, the debate can potentially bring a new perspective to politics and government that might lessen this sense of alienation. The debate might also better reflect the issues that women care about, because women, particularly women of color, are more supportive of social welfare policies than are men (e.g., Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Chaney, Alvarez, Nagler 1996; Conway, Steuernagel, and Ahern 1997; Kaufmann 2004; Welch and Hibbing 1992). In an era when over 80 percent of Americans support raising the minimum wage and lifting restrictions that keep welfare recipients from getting education and training for better jobs, and two-thirds support a system of universal health insurance, few of these policy changes to help the disadvantaged can be enacted (Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates, Inc. 2002; The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003, 2005). Strengthening the active religious base for these changes within progressive politics might improve their prospects and transform politics as we know them. Indeed, the recent focus of some progressive leaders on poverty and social safety nets as “moral” issues is a step in this direction.

Some aspects of how the “moral values” debate has developed, though, are not encouraging for women. First, very little visible discussion over moral values reflects how women and women’s roles figure into the issues being debated, with the notable exception of reproductive issues such as abortion and contraception. There is, of course, considerable debate about reproductive rights among religious people. Much of the most visible recent discussion among religious progressives, though, has involved dropping these rights (particularly abortion rights) off the table in the hope of building bridges between the religious and “secular” progressive communities. This approach is not as straightforward as it might seem, however. At a basic level, it largely ignores that reproductive rights are not uniformly opposed by religious people, or even religious denominations. In fact, some religious leaders have asserted moral arguments for supporting reproductive rights based on religious values. These arguments are often based in the idea of respecting women’s moral agency, the idea that women can have the moral authority and ability to make moral decisions themselves (Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice 2005). A “pro-life” position is not core or mandated for religious people and should not be presented that way, in any political discussions.

In addition, approaches to moral values as promoted by progressive leaders often miss key components of women’s public vision. They rarely incorporate fully the ideas about community and interconnectedness articulated by the women we

interviewed. These ideas shift the focus of policy from simply creating a more altruistic society, a focus almost solely on government intervention in social welfare issues, to recognizing that all of us benefit from, are dependent on, and should be engaged in the welfare of our broader communities. Moreover, the values of connectedness articulated by the women

we interviewed suggest that context matters to the meaning of morality, so that “traditional moral values” make little sense to people with limited choices and opportunities—those

The values of connectedness articulated by the women we interviewed suggest that context matters to the meaning of morality, so that “traditional moral values” make little sense to people with limited choices and opportunities—those with limited agency.

with limited agency. When circumstances created by policy, cultural limitations, and economic structures constrain choices and opportunities for some, often by privileging the experiences of others, they constrain agency and authority in important ways, violating the concepts of individual worth and dignity as described by many of the women we interviewed. In this context, “traditional moral values” become fairly ineffective, even meaningless, concepts.

Debates over poverty illustrate this point. This issue has received some attention within the “moral values” debate. It is also an issue that is perhaps best understood from a women’s perspective. Most of the adult poor in this country are women. Their poverty and disadvantage is tied in part to lower wages in the occupations that women hold, wage and employment discrimination based on gender and race, and their responsibility for children and a lack of supports such as child care and paid leave and opportunities such as education, particularly among those who start out poor.

To the extent that these dynamics are recognized in policy today, though, they frequently involve debates about marriage and marriage promotion, which present women, particularly African American women, as deviating from the proper moral roles that would bring stability to them and cohesion to society. For some leaders, this focus on marriage serves as a distraction from addressing the larger structural issues that cause poverty. Even when these larger issues are addressed, they are frequently not understood as specific to women: eliminating gender or race-based wage discrimination is rarely discussed as a way to combat poverty, even among many progressive political leaders. Expanding child care is sometimes considered as a solution, but even it is generally given only cursory attention. Revamping our family policy to provide universal access to early care and education for children, and paid sick and family leave for working parents, is not at the top of today’s political agenda.

The marriage promotion debate is also an example of how assumptions about the content of “moral values” frequently ignore both context and women’s agency. From a perspective rooted in ideas about interconnectedness and respecting women’s moral authority, marriage promotion policies may not be a relevant or appropriate

way to promote “moral values.” First, many aspects of the social and economic circumstances that shape poor women’s lives make “traditional” family structures, often presented as morally superior, unrealistic—not just because of issues like domestic violence, which is increasingly recognized as an important issue within those policies, but also because of factors impacting the pool of “marriageable” men, including relatively poor employment opportunities in the networks available to most poor women (e.g., Jones-DeWeever 2002). In addition, these programs denigrate the moral agency and authority of low-income single mothers, assuming that the choice not to marry, or to have children outside of marriage, must be a bad one, rather than valuing all sorts of families.³

The values of the women interviewed for our study point to the need to rethink the moral assumptions evident in the values debate. Thus far, most progressive leaders are not questioning how women and women’s agency are treated in these

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debates. They are also not challenging the tendency to treat issues of social welfare as individual problems, or even as problems affecting a specific demographic group, rather than as problems affecting us all and

shaped by the larger economic and social contexts that we all create. Progressive political leaders have not, for the most part, incorporated a larger understanding of the combined importance of shared responsibility and individual dignity, which together call for rejecting moral judgments blind to the circumstances facing the disadvantaged, as well as those that fail to respect women’s agency and authority, as an alternative way to think about social welfare policy. Doing so would qualitatively change how progressive leaders approach political change.

The public visions of the women we interviewed call for a larger role in promoting the health of disadvantaged communities by government and politics—rather than the smaller one that has been argued for in recent years. They also call for more engaged involvement by individual citizens, both advantaged and disadvantaged, in creating and defining how those programs work. They demand more engaged listening to the circumstances that surround poverty in the United States, rather than judgments of choices (for example single motherhood) seen as violating traditional moral standards, and recognizing the agency of the supposed beneficiaries of social welfare policies and their larger communities. In other words, approaching social welfare in this way requires more from the public sphere, but in partnership with communities and individuals. Without these links, programs can become

³ On a practical level, research has also called into question whether marital status is really a causal factor improving children’s well-being, one of the main justifications for the marriage promotion initiative; Jones-DeWeever 2002.

dehumanizing and discourage connections across lines of race and class. But if we can reconceive the public sphere to be a place of partnerships and relationships among citizens and communities, rather than of individuals simply protecting their rights (for example, the rights of the better off to be free of crime), we can perhaps create the kind of social networks and ties that build more integrated and consciously interdependent communities, while respecting the dignity of all.

TRANSFORMING RELIGION

In the same way that women's moral values and public visions can help us rethink the role of government and politics, they can help us rethink the role of religion and moral values, also in light of how women view their lives and experiences. Many of the women we interviewed have become certain in and comfortable with their own sense of religious authority: they see their work in community as a calling with moral authority, and many feel free to challenge (male) religious authority. They are arguing for their own sense of moral agency, in the face of religious values and traditions that would deny it. In many cases, they are also arguing for their religious traditions to provide them support for the work they are doing, by more directly addressing the values and issues that women themselves are applying to activist work around social justice issues. When women ask for their denominations to pay attention to these issues and values, they are asking for recognition of their moral agency.

Many religions do, of course, address social justice issues. Most congregations, though, do not—particularly among denominations that are not historically Black Protestant churches. Among African American Christian churches, almost 70 percent participate in justice programs, and almost half participate in organizing work. In contrast, less than a third of Catholic and Orthodox congregations, and less than a fourth of Protestant congregations from mainline or evangelical denominations, do (Dudley and Roozen 2001).

This lack of emphasis on social justice is partly responsible for why the women we interviewed are involved in religious activism outside their congregations. Many expressed frustration with the lack of involvement of their congregations and denominations in community and social justice issues. For example, as a white mainline Protestant says of her congregation,

It's really small and it's very much a family atmosphere, and so they aren't as apt to reach out into other places, because they very much use church as a way to get away into a social kind of place. There are a few people that really like to get outside of the church walls and use their faith to make a difference, and keep trying to push people that way. That would be my biggest issue [with the church].

An African American Christian has similar frustrations:

These are issues of conscience and issues of justice that require activism and require some type of change. And I was disturbed by the fact that as a person of faith, I wasn't aware of what was going on until I was in the

system seeing it every day, and I was disturbed by the fact that there were so few people of faith, in the sense of faith community leaders, that were involved or even seemed to care.

For some women, the lack of a justice orientation is enough to inspire them to question whether to stay in their congregation or even their denomination. A Catholic activist, for example, describes her lack of exposure to the social justice tradition in her church. Personally, she had drawn connections to social justice based on what she sees as her most important religious values, the dignity and sacredness of individuals. But not until she discussed these links with other people working in her activist organization did she realize that hers was a shared way to think about social justice:

That is something that [the director] has brought in, based on being a Sundancer. That part of what you do is that you build community, that you recognize the sacredness of every person.... And it's been very powerful.... People have come to recognize that beyond the work, this is grounded in a deeper place.... So on a personal level, I certainly saw this work—this is another way to recognize the dignity and sacredness of people, through this work. And then came to find that the others that I work with are also grounded in that as well.

This woman's activism has provoked frustration in her about her religious tradition. Her work involves going to religious services in a variety of congregations, which has made her more aware of how comparatively little her own church addresses issues of justice, despite an emphasis on the idea of the dignity and worth of individuals:

As I've actually gone to these services, I've learned that the social justice component of the Catholic Church is weak. I mean it's there, and it's certainly much stronger in liberal theology, but that's not a mainstream strain of Catholicism. So from my experience, the Catholic Church is primarily—if we're talking about the community and what you do in the community—it's primarily about service, helping others through direct service. It's not very strong on changing the system. So, at least for me and my experience and the different churches that I've gone to, the Unitarian Universalists, from my perspective it's very clearly in its mission directed at not just seeking your own knowledge of truth, but about working to change, about social justice. Same with what I found with the Methodist church. So no, in terms of social justice activism, that didn't really—I wasn't really directed in that through my own experience in the Church. It was definitely much more directed towards service. But, again in emphasizing the dignity and sacredness of every person, then it certainly is connected to the social justice.

Personally, this woman found the link between justice and individual sacredness an easy one to make, but her own congregation did not address it. As a result, she is torn about whether to stay in her church or leave it.

This experience suggests that congregations can play an important and more visible role in the process of women (and men) drawing links between basic religious values and social justice issues. Some, especially those in African American Protestant denominations, do. It is not surprising, then, that African American women are among the most likely women we interviewed to draw connections between religious values and justice. Also in our interviews, many women point specifically to clergy and others in religious leadership as helping them develop an understanding of how religious values can involve a mandate to work for social justice. But many others, like the woman above, express frustration that their congregations do not have this emphasis. Even some African Americans in historically Black denominations, some of whom are quoted elsewhere in this report, note that they are not challenged to think about justice or power within the context of their faith values and traditions.

Not only are many churches not addressing issues of justice, but some actively oppose women's social justice activism, sometimes even when it happens outside church walls. Several women speak of resistance from clergy or other leadership when they attempted to pursue activism. A few stories along these lines are particularly compelling. In one, another Latina Catholic was asked to leave her church because she was active in a local social justice group. She was told to spend more time volunteering in her church:

I was told I would not go to heaven if I did not do more in the Church. But for me, God's work was working with the people where they're at. The Sisters told me that the community work didn't count, that I would build a statue, not go to heaven. So I asked, Why am I living two lives? I didn't want to break off my community work. I decided that if I'm going to save myself, I'm going to save myself on 18th street.

Another woman, an African American, left her church, because she was told that her efforts to mobilize members to work with an interfaith group focused on children's issues was inappropriate. In this case, the resistance wasn't about the justice as much as the interfaith component:

The pastor was offended by the fact that all these different religious traditions' texts were being passed out at the church.... I noticed that there were certain people that started staying away from me, and of course I'm more sensitive to this because the pastor has told me you can't be passing out these other heathen, pagan documents in my church. I said well, honestly maybe I'll just cool this because I didn't realize that I was in such a conservative church, and I didn't realize that when we talk about doing all this social justice work, we're talking about just Christian folks doing it.... It was the dichotomy of what the espoused tradition was and what the experienced tradition was. And because it was a part of the denominational tradition that I'm ordained in, and I'd grown up in, I'm thinking we're all on the same page, but when it comes down to a congregation's practice of that tradition it's oftentimes very different.

In this case, the woman speaking is an ordained minister, but her contribution to the congregation was unwelcome and seen as inappropriate; her authority was clearly not respected.

These examples illustrate the fundamental ways that women's activism can challenge their religious traditions and, as a result, be limited by them. What many women want is a place to talk about the connections among their values, activism, and politics, a place that offers them a role in defining those connections. They see their religious congregations as a place where they should be able to talk about

What many women want is a place to talk about the connections among their values, activism, and politics, a place that offers them a role in defining those connections.

the connections between politics and morality, but not as a place to learn them unthinkingly. They want a sense of respect for their moral agency.

This is an impossible balance for many women to find. Almost none of the women we interviewed felt completely comfortable with the level of respect they felt for their leadership or values in their congregations, and so most found alternative solutions. Some, unable to live with a lack of respect for their moral agency, have left their religions. Others stay, hoping to change them, and expecting that their dilemma is temporary.

For example, a white Catholic describes her own conflicts and those she has observed in other women working in her Catholic social justice organization:

I think by working in a faith-based organization there are times when you have to question what the dictates are, you have to, because they don't always jibe with your view of the environment, as a woman. I can say that. There are also times when you are very conflicted by this church that you love and you are serving, and you have to learn how to deal with that, and some people don't. And some women, volunteers and staff and leaders, have to walk away from that, because it's too big a bridge for them to cross. So I think that you have to wrestle with that.... Maybe twenty years ago we would be talking and we would be saying totally different things to each other about this. But thankfully things have gone well for us women. And I think twenty years from now, watch out. I don't think we are going to stay where we are, and I don't think it is going to remain the way it is now, and I think the church is going, they are going to have to reconcile that.

Another, a Hispanic Catholic, describes a similar reconciliation based on her anger not only at women's roles but the larger system of hierarchical power:

People ask me, 'Does it make you angry that women are not ordained in the Catholic Church?' I say no. 'Why doesn't it make you angry?' 'Because I'm against men being ordained in the Catholic Church, too.' Now, that immediately upsets everyone. But I am. I think it's a ridiculous system. Am I going to change it in my lifetime? I doubt it. So I'm very active in my

church. I speak from the pulpit in my church. I do everything I have to do. Sometimes it rubs people wrong, what I do. But I never do it to rub them wrong and I never do it to kind of say, 'I'm against this.' What I'll do is I'll say, 'We're doing this event,' you know, 'How many people can come? Raise your hands.' And in the Catholic Church, raise your hands? Oh, no, you don't do those things. But, so I do everything I can to help build the church. I get into no fights with anyone about any dogma. I just don't care. You know, my commitment is to this wonderful group of human beings. My commitment's to God. I honor that. I pay my dues every week. People say, you know, 'I'm not going to support the church if Father So-and-So arrives there.' I am. Right? Because I'm supporting this community. This isn't about a given priest. So that's how I've survived it.

The ways that these women have reconciled their conflict with church policies, enabling them to stay within their religion, echo findings in other research that women perceive their religious life as more interconnected and relational, allowing them to downplay their conflict with hierarchy (Ozorak 1996). Of course, anyone working in an institution, particularly one with values at its core, is likely to experience some

Religions should work to provide settings where women can participate fully in defining and interpreting moral values.

conflict. Still, women should not have to choose between their congregations and their sense of their own moral agency and authority. Instead, religions should work to provide settings where women can participate fully in defining and interpreting moral values. In doing so, religious institutions could benefit from a renewal of many women's activism and commitment to their values and goals.

REVITALIZING WOMEN'S ORGANIZING

Women's movement leaders should also pay attention to the values and public vision of religious women activists. The basic ideas of community and interconnectedness, particularly when they are used to reconstitute the rights-based language of American politics, can provide an alternative way to define and invigorate the goals and values of the U.S. women's movement. For the past several decades, this movement has relied, for the most part, on a rights-based set of justifications. This strategy, of course, has often been successful, resulting in legislative and judicial victories for women's equality by framing it as justified by U.S. democratic and constitutional institutions—a language in many ways appropriate to our political system (Gelb and Palley 1996).

At the same time, a purely rights-based approach may have more limited effectiveness for the longer-term transformation of U.S. society into one that incorporates women's lives and values at its core, precisely because it is limited in its ability to address the exclusion of women and women's experiences from public life.

The women's movement has not been able to achieve many of its intended goals, and it has been dismissed and attacked as inappropriate and unappealing to most women, a movement that seeks to carve out "unnatural" roles for them. Its attempts to address the complicated nature of rethinking and transforming women's roles in the public and private spheres—for example, by pushing for comprehensive child care or other family-friendly policies—have seen modest gains but have not come close to the large scale transformations that are hoped for. Work by the women's movement on behalf of disadvantaged and low-income women has also often been frustrated. Such criticisms and difficulties may reflect, in part, the difficulty of creating a women-friendly world by extending a set of rights based on men's experiences to women, without also addressing the denial of their moral agency in particular, and without working to transform the specifically moral norms that mandate their "proper" or "natural" roles as primarily in the private or family sphere.

Bringing women's values and visions to public life might help do both. The women interviewed for this study provide a new model for thinking about the goals and values underlying women's movements. At a basic level, these women are challenging

Women in religious social justice groups and women's movements share a basic commitment to fighting economic, social, and political inequality.

male authority, and particularly white male authority, in ways that often resemble the work of American feminists. Both groups hope to transform the

place of women and women's values, whether implicitly or explicitly. They also share a basic commitment to fighting economic, social, and political inequality.

The values that the women we interviewed describe, including their focus on the ideas of interconnectedness in combination with valuing basic rights and dignity, could help transform feminist goals, strategies, and values, particularly the predominantly rights-based language used by many recent women's movements. They may offer a way to reconceive assumptions about women's roles in political, social, and economic life, by providing an alternative that reframes and redefines the language of rights. That is, the voices and progressive moral vision of women working as grassroots social justice activists could provide vision and energy for strengthening, broadening, and transforming the women's movement. They can help envision and promote a new moral order based on women's lives, experiences, and values. They suggest that rather than shying away from moral language, the women's movement should reclaim it in a way that recognizes women's moral agency. One way to work towards this goal is by building connections between religious social justice organizations, particularly those led by women, and women's organizations, in ways that promote real and active listening to the language, values, and visions that each use.

This rethinking may have an added benefit of invigorating support for women's organizing among groups of women who have been traditionally less involved in it. Most obviously, it may inspire religious social justice activists to get involved in feminist organizing. Currently, there are few connections between feminist organizing

and religious social justice groups, even though women play a visible and important role in both. Many women's movement leaders are skeptical of the potential of religion for mobilizing women around gender equality, or of the commitment of religious women to feminist causes, especially given the role that religion has played in sustaining women's inequality and traditional roles.

In our interviews, we also found that many religious women feel unwelcome among (and also skeptical of) the feminist community, even when they share its goals. As they do in political and religious institutions, these women feel uncomfortable. In part, they recognize that how they perceive their values contrasts with how feminists talk about them. This discomfort is perhaps most obvious among women doing activism around reproductive issues from a religious standpoint: many describe feeling that their "secular" colleagues distrust them. But women working on other issues also note that they feel uninspired by the secular focus and values of women's organizing.

Religious social justice activists do not feel the need for "secular" feminists to adopt their religious language, symbolism, and even values, but they do want to feel that their own motivations, contributions, and ideas are not unwelcome. They want those ideas to be recognized as legitimate reasons to act on behalf of feminist causes.

The voices and progressive moral vision of women working as grassroots social justice activists could provide vision and energy for strengthening, broadening, and transforming the women's movement.

They are not unaware of the patriarchal aspects of the values and traditions of their religions, but they bring their own (often feminist) interpretations to them, and they see personal importance in holding on to them. They do not want to be seen as (at best) ignorant or (at worst) inherently un-feminist because of their commitments to those values and traditions. In other words, they want feminists themselves to recognize their moral agency.

Rethinking feminist values in terms of interconnection and community may also provide a new lens for thinking about diversity and the women's movement. Among the women we interviewed, those from both religious and racial minorities were most likely to articulate ideas about justice and equality, most likely to allude to the idea of interconnectedness and shared welfare, and most dedicated to a responsibility to developing leadership among other women. An approach to women's organizing that puts ideas about mutuality and shared obligation at its center, together with more "rights-based" thinking about pursuing women's well-being and agency, might resonate with these communities and mobilize more women's involvement. It might help to expand the base and the appeal of women's movement.

To advance these goals, women's movements should pursue concrete connections with religious social justice groups, particularly those led by women. Feminist and religious social justice groups currently have relatively few connections. This has not always been true: historically, feminists and women's movement leaders have also been at the forefront of movements on behalf of social welfare, and even

early in the second wave of the women's movement, in the 1960s, some religious women worked fairly closely with more "secular" feminists (Braude 2004; Buchanan 1996; Hunt 2004; Skocpol 1992). Now, though, not only do women in religious social justice organizing frequently feel unwelcome, but many women's movement leaders are concerned about the role of religion as a potential mobilizer of women around gender equality. Their unease is justified in many ways: certainly religion has played a large role in sustaining women's inequality and traditional roles. At the same time, religious values have inspired some women, and been reinterpreted by them, to demand moral agency and public authority.

Women's movements could pursue many avenues to build stronger relationships with religious social justice activists, particularly women, through formal and informal efforts at network building and collaboration. Members of feminist and interfaith groups might serve on one another's boards or program committees, attend and present at one another's events and conferences, or highlight one another

The activity of the women we interviewed can be a way to think about invigorating and strengthening politics, religion, and the women's movement.

in newsletters and other publications. They might jointly participate in media work, such as writing editorials or press releases and holding press conferences. They might share mailing lists, provide policy contacts, or share knowledge of ways to reach out to their respective communities and constituencies. They might hold meetings or conference calls for younger staff with the leaders of each other's organizations. Leaders might commit to taking visible roles in direct action or advocacy work pursued by one another's groups. In the longer term, they might pursue joint projects related to their mutual programmatic goals.

Women's movement groups could also benefit from more widely adopting some of the strategies that interfaith social justice groups (particularly those with women's leadership) have developed to encourage women's sense of agency and authority. Key components of successful efforts to do so, as described by the women we interviewed, include not only recognizing women's values and visions, but allowing women to tap into the emotional core of their work and commitment to their values, and asking women to define the content and design of efforts to empower their political voice. These strategies can help women to recognize and overcome their own hesitations, as well as the resistance that many have experienced, in claiming a public voice—both of which, as many of the women interviewed show, still confront many women in very gender-specific ways. These strategies also acknowledge that women's experiences with relationships and connectedness, in the public and private spheres, differ in ways that make many traditional training strategies less relevant to their lives. Drawing on the emotional side of these experiences, for example, seems to inspire and empower women. Many women's groups, of course, have used similar tools to train and empower women, often with success. But adopting them on a wider basis could inspire a newly invigorated source of passion for the goals and strategies of women's organizing.

Feminists, religious leaders, and progressive political leaders should embrace the work of religious women doing social justice activism. The activity of the women we interviewed can be a way to think about invigorating and strengthening politics, religion, and the women's movement. Their values can provide new energy, vision, and even moral authority to feminist goals. They can provide an integrated way to think about morality and politics, one that incorporates women's lives and experiences.

Appendix: Research Design and Methodology for the Interviews

This report is based on a series of 75 in-depth, qualitative interviews. Most of the interviews were done with women working as volunteers, staff, or leaders of interfaith groups working on social justice issues. The vast majority of the 44 groups involved in the study operate locally, within their communities, although a few work nationally or as coordinating bodies for local efforts. As interfaith groups, they operate as their own independent groups—often affiliated with but not solely run by a specific congregation or denomination—to mobilize and encourage participation across religious lines. As social justice groups, they bring together women and men to address specific local, state, or national issues. Most use religious language and imagery to accomplish this, and most rely on the religious networks that exist in their communities.

As points of comparison, we also included a few groups that do not fit this description. A handful of people—about 15—were interviewed from social justice groups sponsored by, or affiliated with, a particular religious denomination or congregation. This group, though small, allowed us to assess whether the interfaith experience differs substantively from the denominational experience, a theme that will be explored in more depth in future publications (and interestingly, most of the women working in denominational groups also describe working informally on an interfaith basis with other groups on projects and issues). In each of the four cities where we conducted interviews, we also interviewed people from one “secular” group—organizations that do not have either an interfaith or denominational affiliation. In almost every case, though, women spoke of the strong importance of their faith and were eager to discuss their religious values as relevant to their work. Again, this theme will be discussed in more detail later in the series. As is evident in chapter 4, we also included several women (seven) from groups that do not have a social justice orientation, but are rather focused on so-called cultural issues from a conservative perspective. The different approaches that these women bring to their work are explored in this report. Finally, we interviewed seven men. Most of these men are leaders of organizations, and their insights on women’s involvement and leadership were used to explore how women come to claim a public voice. This set of issues is discussed somewhat in this report but, again, will be explored in more depth in future publications.

About half of our respondents work in the leadership of organizations, generally as managers or organizers. Half work as activists in some other capacity. More details on the activities they engage in are below.

The interviews were conducted in four sites: Atlanta, Chicago, the metropolitan region of the District of Columbia, and the area of Southern California from Los Angeles north to Santa Barbara. These regions were chosen for their geographic diversity—a southeastern, Midwestern, northeastern, and Western city are each included. Each also has a distinct demographic composition and specific history of organizing. Atlanta, a home for the civil rights movement, is mostly African American (32 percent) and white (56 percent). Another 7 percent of the population is Latino/a, and 4 percent is Asian American. In Chicago, 57 percent of the population is white, 20 percent is African American, 17 percent is Hispanic, and 5 percent is Asian American. Chicago’s history of civil rights organizing and conflict is both long and at times difficult. It is one of the main centers of the Alinsky style of organizing, which often encompasses a religious component to its work and trainings. The metropolitan D.C. area is better known for its national organizations, but many local activists work in the shadows of these groups. Historically, many have focused on the civil rights and economic development of African Americans, who make up 30 percent of the area’s population, but its growing diversity is being addressed by groups dedicated to serving and organizing Hispanics (10 percent of the population) and Asian Americans (8 percent). Finally, Southern California encompasses both big-city and small-town life. In Los Angeles, Latinos/as are the largest racial or ethnic group, at 44 percent of the population, compared with 33 percent for whites and 8 percent for African Americans. Los Angeles is also home to the largest proportion of Asian Americans among our study’s sites, at 13 percent of the population. A few hours north, Santa Barbara also has a large Hispanic population, at 28 percent, while whites make up 63 percent of the population. Asian Americans are 4 percent and African Americans 1 percent of the population (all data on demographics in this paragraph are from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004b). The Southern California region has some of the more visible and active efforts to organize Hispanics and Asian Americans among the sites we chose, in part because those communities are so well represented in the area.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for our study was not randomly selected. Instead, a snowball method was used to allow for a more diverse sample and to ensure that the voices of a wide range of people of faith were heard. As the interviewing process began, new participants were often recommended to the study’s interviewers via “word of mouth” referrals.

Because the sample is small and not random, findings from this study cannot be assumed to be representative of religious social justice activists and organizations nationwide. This is particularly true where we provide percentages of our sample who give certain types of responses: they cannot be assumed to represent how a

random sample of women doing this work might answer. However, analysis of findings from the interviews can provide an in-depth look at the experiences of many women in this type of activism, particularly where there is relatively deep consensus among the women interviewed.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN RELIGIOUSLY BASED ACTIVISM?

An important recent study, *Faith-based Community Organizing: The State of the Field*, gives a good sense of what religiously based social justice work looks like in the United States. This research provides a helpful backdrop for our work. It is based on a survey of a nationally representative sample of “interfaith, broad-based, locally constituted, multi-issue and nonpartisan” organizations that follow the Industrial Areas Foundation model of interfaith organizing (Warren and Wood 2001; 1).⁴ The study finds that faith-based community organizing is “second in size only to the labor movement among drives for social justice among low-income Americans today,” involving 3,500 congregations along with approximately 500 local unions, public schools, and other institutions, encompassing over two million members of these institutions (R. Wood 2002; 6).

While its data are not directly comparable to the demographics of our interview participants and organizations, from this survey we have a general picture of the racial, gender, and denominational makeup of faith-based community organizations. They involve a diverse set of member organizations, for example: 36 percent of the organizations’ member institutions (i.e., congregations or other community organizations) are predominantly white, 35 percent are predominantly African American, 21 percent are predominantly Hispanic, 11 percent are immigrant of various races, 7 percent are interracial, and a little over 1 percent are Asian American (Warren and Wood 2001; information on racial and ethnic composition of the United States is below). Leadership of these groups is also relatively well integrated. Boards of directors have a ratio of women to men of 51.3 percent to 48.7 percent. Among organizers, men had a greater presence at 56.3 percent, versus 43.7 percent women.

Religious organizing is perhaps not as interfaith as it could be. About 95 percent of member institutions of the organizations surveyed are predominantly Christian (Warren and Wood 2001). Of the remaining member groups, 2 percent involve Jewish congregations, 2 percent involve Unitarian Universalists, and nearly 1 percent involve other non-Christian denominations (Warren and Wood 2001). The survey found very few evangelical Christian congregations participating in faith-based organizing.

THE WOMEN (AND MEN) WE INTERVIEWED

Due to our study’s focus on women’s participation and experience within religiously based activism, nearly 91 percent of the people interviewed are women.

⁴ This model generally includes a lead or head organizer that engages in the recruitment of volunteer activists from member institutions, which are often congregations (Warren and Wood 2001).

Although it is nowhere near as skewed, women do have a greater presence than men across a wide range of denominations. The American Religious Identification Survey finds that across religious denominations, adult women (18 years and older) usually represent more than half of membership. For example, women represent 53 percent of Catholic membership, 54 percent of Baptist membership, 57 percent of evangelical/born-again Christian membership, 57 percent of Methodist membership, 59 percent of Pentecostal membership, 59 percent of Episcopalian/Anglican membership, and 64 percent of Church of God membership (Keysar, Kosmin, and Mayer 2001). As noted above, women are also more than half of board members, but slightly less than half of organizers, among interfaith community organizations.

More than half (54 percent) of interview participants in our study identified themselves as white, compared with 69 percent of Americans who were categorized as white in the Census. In our sample, 5 percent of participants are Arab American. In the United States, the Census includes Arab Americans in the category “white,” and includes them in the 69 percent. The Census Bureau does, though, estimate that 0.42 percent of Americans are of Arab descent (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a and 2004b). The next largest racial and ethnic groups in our sample are African Americans and Hispanics, each 15 percent of those interviewed, compared with 12 and 13 percent of the U.S. population, respectively (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a). Asian Americans are a much larger proportion of our study’s sample, at 9 percent, than in the United States, where they are 4 percent of the population (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a). We were unable to interview any Native Americans, who are 0.7 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a). In a next phase of interviews planned for 2005 and 2006, we will be expanding our sample of women of color, including Native American women, and will be able to explore their values and experiences in religious social justice work.

Interview participants in the study span the life cycle. Those 30 years old or under are 19 percent of our sample, and those aged 30 to 45 are 31 percent. Nearly 23 percent are between 46 and 55 years old, and 24 percent are aged 56 to 70. Only one interviewee is over 70 (the age of one participant was unknown). Although parallel age categories were not available, according to the 2000 Census, our sample is older on average than the U.S. population: nationally, 37 percent of Americans are between 20 and 44 years of age, 13 percent between 45 to 54 years of age, and 21 percent are 55 years or older (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2001). Our sample more closely reflects the age distribution of religious Americans: According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 23 percent of U.S. adults with a religious affiliation are between the ages of 18 and 29, and 16 percent are 65 years or older, with the majority (about 60 percent) between ages 30 and 64 (Keysar, Kosmin, and Mayer 2001).

About 73 percent of interview participants are affiliated with a Christian religion, although denominations within this group vary. Catholics make up 20 percent

of the sample and mainline Protestants make up 24 percent. Another 16 percent of interview participants are white or Hispanic evangelical Christians. African American Christians—who are generally from evangelical denominations but differ theologically and historically from white or Hispanic evangelical traditions—are 12 percent. One interviewee is Eastern Orthodox. Of non-Christian denominations, Muslims make up 11 percent of interviewees. Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Unitarian Universalists are each about 3 percent, and one participant each is Baha'i and Sikh. Only one participant reported no religious affiliation. The high representation of Christians in our study mirrors national data on Christian affiliation in the United States. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 76.5 percent surveyed identified themselves as Christian (Keysar, Kosmin, and Mayer 2001). Our study, however, has a higher proportion of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Unitarian Universalist affiliation than does the United States. These religions are 1.3, 0.5, 0.4, 0.5, and 0.3 percent of the country, respectively. Outside of their activist work, 63 of 74 interview participants reported belonging to a congregation and attending services, while 10 said they did not.

THE NATURE OF WORK AMONG THE GROUPS INVOLVED

The leaders and activists interviewed in the study take on a range of activities to further the work of their organizations and causes. These activities include engaging in visionary and strategic planning that guides the direction of the organization; directing and managing the overall functioning of the organization; providing program support; engaging in advocacy and political organizing through interactions with policymakers; directing the mobilization of grassroots membership around national issues; engaging in outreach and community organizing through local, door-to-door style community interactions and mobilization of community members around local issues; and providing direct services. The activities performed by most of interview participants fell into more than one of the above mentioned categories of activity, as they took on multiple roles within organizations.

Many of the interviewees for our study, and their organizations, work on a local level. More than half of those interviewed are engaged in outreach and community organizing. About a third of respondents do advocacy and political organizing at either the national or local level. More than a third of the study's interviewees serve as executive directors or managers of their organization, and over half are responsible for organizational vision and strategy, either from the position of a lead organizer or executive director, or as a board member or long time activist. Nine interview participants engaged in direct service work and seven provided program support to their organization.

The 44 organizations represented in the sample have a wide range of functions. A fifth of the organizations do not engage in any type of advocacy or political activity. Instead these organizations focus on direct social services and community building. Another one-fifth are also mainly service-oriented organizations but do occasionally engage in advocacy or political work around the issues faced by

those they serve. Almost half of the organizations engage in issue advocacy as a means to creating social and economic change. These organizations engage in voter drives, issue education, and membership mobilization and politicization within local communities, all designed to engage decision-makers and the local political system on issues they care about. The remaining tenth of the organizations engage in more direct political action such as supporting specific political candidates and lobbying. They also usually encourage their membership to support specific legislation and candidates.

The issues addressed by the organizations in this study also vary widely. Those engaged in direct service provision provide clothing, housing, counseling, immigrant services, medical assistance, and youth services. Organizations that mainly engage in direct service provision, but that also engage in advocacy when needed, tend to cover similar issue areas. Many also do public education on issues such as religious intolerance and racial and ethnic discrimination. Organizations that specifically focus on advocacy focus more heavily on economic issues such as housing, wages and labor rights, community development, environmental sustainability, immigrant rights and civil liberties, criminal justice, racial discrimination, child care, or welfare.

Half of the groups represented in the sample explicitly discuss and reflect on religious values or take part in prayer on a daily basis. In another third, religion is a central component but less explicitly visible in daily routines. In three organizations, religion is never explicitly discussed, and another four consider themselves completely secular.

RACIAL, RELIGIOUS, AND GENDER DIVERSITY AMONG THE GROUPS INVOLVED

Of the 44 organizations represented in the sample, half were identified by interview participants as not particularly diverse in terms of their racial and ethnic makeup. These organizations are almost if not solely comprised of only one racial or ethnic group. Of those 22, twelve are predominantly Caucasian, four are predominantly Arab American, two are predominantly Hispanic, two are predominantly Asian American, and two are predominantly African American. Seven of the organizations were described as equally comprised of two racial groups. Ten were identified as even more racially diverse or mixed, with no one group accounting for more than half of the organization's membership or staff (respondents from five organizations did not provide assessments of the racial diversity of their groups).

In terms of religious diversity, two-thirds of the organizations represented in our study are interfaith, while twelve are of one denomination. Of the organizations categorized as interfaith, eight involve members from different Christian denominations only, and three of these span conservative Christian evangelical denominations. Five interfaith organizations are Christian and Jewish only, and three are Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. Another twelve are interfaith in its broadest sense, and include membership from a wide range of both Christian and non-Christian

denominations: Muslims and Jews as well as smaller religions such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is.

Interviewees were also asked about the gender diversity within their organizations. Some interviewees responded to this question by detailing the gender breakdown of the organization's leaders, or members of the Board or Advisory Committees. Others gave the gender breakdown of their staff and volunteers. Of the 20 interviewees that discussed the gender makeup of their Board, eight of the organizations represented by these interviewees were identified as having mostly women board members, six as having half men and half women, and another six as having mostly male board members. For the 21 interviewees that detailed the gender composition of staff, 17 responded that their organization had a predominantly female staff, one indicated that the staff at his/her organization was an equal mix of women and men, two indicated that their staff was predominantly male, and one person was uncertain as to the exact breakdown. Forty-three interviewees provided information about the gender breakdown among their volunteer membership. Of those 43 interviewees, 33 said their volunteers were mostly women, seven indicated there was an equal number of men and women volunteers, and three indicated that their organization's volunteers were predominantly male.

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