

**Conversion and Relationship with God:
A Study of Gendered Experience within Christianity**

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My interest in Christian conversion stems from a dissertation I completed as an undergraduate religious studies student. My paternal great grandfather, the Rev. Joseph Jenkins, was a minister in the Calvinist Methodist church. He was instrumental in initiating and developing the revival, or conversion, of thousands of individuals within Wales in 1904. Subsequent to learning about the conversion of thousands of people, I developed a fascination with the process of conversion, what this meant to people, what they experienced and the impact it had upon their lives.

My research into Jenkins' work developed into a broader interest about the nature of conversion; why does it occur, what experiences do people have, is conversion still relevant today? Parallel to my interest in conversion was an interest in gender differences, it seemed an obvious move to link gender and conversion. I wanted to explore whether women and men experience conversion differently.

The overall aim of the research was to identify whether there was a difference in the conversion experiences of women and men who converted to Christianity. In order to meet this aim, evidence of the individual experiences of women and men would need to be gathered and analysed. Therefore, a general understanding of gender based issues that exist within the Christian church would need to be established. I was interested in the stories that people had to tell, in their experiences of what had happened to them in the period prior to their conversion, what happened during the conversion and how this had subsequently changed their lives.

It was necessary to identify people who wished to take part in the research. I contacted Evangelical and charismatic churches within the south Wales area, many were supportive and agreed to place notices asking for participants from within the church. A pastor from an Evangelical church offered to ask members of his church's congregation whether they would consent to participate in the research; a small number of people agreed. In addition, two other people with links to Evangelical churches consented to take part in the research. The subsequent focus of my research conducted via interviews was on those from an Evangelical type faith. The selection of participants who were interviewed is therefore based upon a random selection, this means that no general statements or conclusions can be drawn from the evidence, it is very specific to those

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

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

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

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

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

This study used qualitative research as a method of exploring whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men. The study is specific and involved a small selection of participants and contributions to the Alister Hardy database, therefore interpretation of data within this chapter cannot be applied in a general sense to gender issues or differences.

The work of key scholars who had devised models of conversion were used as foundation from which to organise the evidence when the research had been completed. Henri Gooren's "factors influencing religious activity" (Gooren, 2010, pp. 51-52) has been used as the principal method of classification as Gooren uses a broad range of categories which covers the complex components of people's lives. The headings, based on Gooren's classification will include "social," "institutional," "individual" and "contingency." Gooren's focus was on the factors that led people to religious conversion. Gooren's work misses an essential element of the conversion paradigm, he did not include provision for the impact that conversion had on the lives of individuals. This was modelled on the work of Lewis Rambo who proposed a seven stage model which included consequences to conversion. A notable element of Rambo's model is his reflection that any examination of the difference that conversion makes to the lives of individuals will be inherently biased (Rambo, 1993, p. 142). He writes that all religious communities have their own evaluation criteria by which the religious experience will be measured. This has significance, as will be seen, for this research as the consequences of conversion are interpreted in this instance, principally from the perspective of evangelical beliefs. With regards to evangelical Christianity, this is interpreted by those who have experienced conversion by the writings in the New Testament. In light of this, a section regarding theological factors has also been included. Examples of findings have been collated below, and have been interpreted.

Social Factors

This section includes possible influences from family members, friends or acquaintances in individuals' social network. The presence of social factors is not a prerequisite to conversion. For example, Participant 3, one of the men who was interviewed, had no friends or family who attended church or were religious. It was found that both men and women who are Christians and have had a conversion experience have friends or family who attended church or considered themselves to be religious.

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

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

Since joining her Church, she has become very involved within it, “In the teaching of the Word, and obviously that's been materialised into me being involved with the youth.” In addition, other members of her family have been baptised, her father and sister, she describes “God really being at the centre of our whole family.” Her mother died of cancer when she was 12 or 13, but prior to this, her mother had been “born again.”

Participant 6 was brought up in a Christian household, his father was a pastor. He recalled being told by his mother that, “You must have your own [religious] experience.” Along with other children of a similar age, he attended Christian camp when he was fourteen years old, one such meeting was, “highly charged” with emotion.

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

Scotland” (RERC 000574). Another man writes that he was “Born and brought up a member of the Salvation Army” (RERC 000653).

Regarding the fifteen women, nine were influenced by religion as children and one was involved in teaching Sunday school later in life. One woman describes a “strong religious background from both parents of generally Evangelical practice” (RERC 000041). She goes on to describe her religious roots as “Baptised Presbyterian (English) confirmed Anglican [...] admitted communicant to Open branch of Plymouth Brethren.” Another woman who contributed to the database writes: “Until I was 21, I was in the ‘I’m as good a Christian as any [camp]” (RERC 000225).

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors refer to possible influences from the church or from specific people who might have had an impact. All those who were interviewed were influenced, to some degree, in their conversion to Christianity by institutional factors. Some people were able to describe what the appeal of the church was. Many of the participants identified strongly with Christian values, there was a feeling of wanting to adhere to a spiritual life. The evangelical church (although consisting of different denominations) proved a powerful factor in influencing nearly all participants. Billy Graham was an important charismatic leader who proved influential with two participants, together with the father of a third. The database contributions illustrate that men’s influences, where this was expressed, included hearing a sermon; listening to a man speaking about spiritual healing. Women were swayed by listening to a bishop speaking; an eminent preacher and listening to mass. These factors are present for both genders, there was no difference perceived in the experience of women or men.

Participant 5 was brought up in a Christian environment, she recalled being told by her mother that, “Your academic studies are important, but nothing is more important than the salvation of your soul.” She attended young people’s meetings of all the local churches in her teenage years, she remembers listening to others giving their testimonies. Participant 3’s first encounter with religion occurred as a result of a chance meeting as a teenager. He, and his friends, became engaged in conversation with some people on the street who talked to him about Jesus and asked him whether he would like to go to church. He recalls having no difficulties in his life, he had a happy and content childhood. He went to church and enjoyed the atmosphere he experienced there. The pastor gave a sermon about salvation which he listened to and was interested in. He describes the language used in the church as being “you’re saved, you’re born again,” “a disciple, a follower of Jesus.” He was given a copy of the Bible and was motivated, though he didn’t

understand why, to read it. He was influenced by Billy Graham; however, this was at a time when he already had a strong faith and belief in God.

Individual Factors

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

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

With respect to contributions from those who shared their accounts with the RERC database, one of the men who shared his experience describes working in India in close proximity to missionaries, he bought a copy of the New Testament, read it and, “when I came to the verse, ‘I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light,’ I was filled with a feeling I had never had before” (RERC 000690).

A female RERC database contributor writes, “I am an artist, and I was seeking for truth from the age of 16 but I always thought that if I had any spiritual experience, I would not believe in it and would dismiss it as a delusion” (RERC 000001).

Contingency Factors

Contingency factors relate to matters that were instrumental in an individual’s conversion. For example, a personal crisis, an important event which prompted, or predisposed, a Christian conversion; these are events that are in some way linked to the individual’s religious experience. There is no appreciable difference between the numbers of women and men who have identifiable contingency factors to their conversion.

Participant 2 expressed that she was accused of plagiarism whilst studying at university, she said that it was a complicated situation involving a few people. She “Really felt like a criminal, I felt so guilty.”

There are many examples of narratives from contributors to the RERC database which fall into this category. One account which stands out is written by a man who worked as an officer on board a ship in the Royal Navy (RERC 000693). He describes becoming embroiled in a life of gambling, alcoholism and sex funded by theft and fraud. Eventually he was caught and discharged to prison following a court-martial. After three years, he was released from prison, and continued with his previous lifestyle. He portrays his life with his children and second wife as, “we might have appeared to have everything we desired, but, underneath the façade, all was chaos.” He drank increasingly large amounts, and on occasion became violent. Ultimately, at his lowest point, he was persuaded by his sister to attend a Christian Fellowship meeting which changed his life.

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

Consequences to Conversion

The participants who were interviewed and those from the RERC database are all clear that their Christian conversion experience had consequences to their lives and that, in nearly every case, this was sustained for the remainder of their lives. With respect to the subjects who contributed to the RERC database, all describe the experience as leaving them with positive changes to their lives. The men described the changes as a change in friends, thoughts, tastes, interests (RERC 000126), a changed attitude towards life (RERC 000221), increased interest in faith healing (RERC 000256). The women described the following changes, feeling loved and at peace and an absence of fear (RERC 000001), a great joy in reading the bible (RERC 000102), becoming a missionary (RERC 000225), finding peace and feeling God had a purpose for her (RERC 000250), feeling inner vitality and strength (RERC 000292). It is clear that both genders experienced a wide variety of positive outcomes. Both genders describe feeling more at peace and contented in their everyday life.

With respect to the participants who were interviewed, there is evidence that their conversion experiences had long lasting effects upon their lives, it has been instrumental in shaping change for all six individuals. Regarding the difference it made to Participant 5’s life, she concedes that for many years she felt she was failing the Lord, felt like she

was climbing a ladder and falling back down again. She describes how, over a period of time her understanding of Christ changed. She felt that she had needed to struggle, whereas in fact, Christ had already accomplished everything on behalf of human beings. She realised that her position in Christ had not changed since the day she had converted. Christ's act of dying for the sins of humanity had atoned for her sins, she declared "justification" or "just as if I had never sinned."

Theological Interpretation

Some of the people who contributed to the RERC database record the impact that conversion had upon them in terms of their understanding of the New Testament, Gospels and God. For example, one man records (RERC 005513):

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

A woman contributor to the RERC database writes that she realised "What it meant to be a Christian, the reason why Christ had died and the reality of sin" (RERC 000225). Another women contributor writes that she went to mass to listen to the music, "And had a sudden and completely unexpected sense of the real Presence [of God] in the Blessed Sacrament" (RERC 000366).

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

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

"He pointed me to a verse of Scripture, Philippians chapter 1:6, He who has begun a good work in you will continue it until the day of Christ Jesus, and I felt a

real peace and assurance from that point on. The Lord has His hand upon me, he has begun his work, because I want this.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The purpose of this study was to explore whether there were gendered differences between the Christian conversion experiences of women and men. The hypothesis was

that as gender plays a role in all aspects of our lives, there would be clear differences displayed in women and men's conversion experiences. It was an unexpected result that gendered experiences, at least superficially, appeared to be very similar with little to distinguish the expected differences.

Differences were identified and these have been presented below along with a theory as to why these differences were subtle and not acknowledged by those interviewed.

Further work was therefore carried out to determine other common themes in both the accounts of participants and those the Alister Hardy database, these include language, metaphors and power.

The study explored whether women and men use language in a different way, for instance whether they include specific metaphors when describing their situation or feelings. It was noted that women and men use different language and words to describe their actual conversion experiences. Differences are to be expected as demonstrated by Jennifer Coates, who writes about gendered discourse: "There is no neutral discourse: whenever we speak we have to choose between different systems of meaning, different sets of values" (Coates, 2004, p. 216). The way in which human beings speak, is based on the concept of their gender, such a paradigm is difficult to resist as it is deeply embedded in one's unconscious mind (Coates, 2004, p. 220). This section will also include examples demonstrating the manner in which, when interviewed, participants speak from an embodied perspective; that is, the language they use is physical in nature. Similarly, Coates reflects that, "gender is not just a cultural construct—it is also a physical reality" (Coates, 2004, p. 220). Within this section on language, there are common themes which have been grouped together to include sin and relationship with God.

The interviews illustrate that women's narratives, in particular, focus on their relationship with sin prior to converting as seen below. Participant 4 defines herself as being "Quite mixed up really." She recalls feeling "dirty" and "ashamed" of herself in the company of her Christian friends. She describes living in a house with two other friends who were "living very immoral and, I suppose, destructive lifestyles." She had a Christian friend who became concerned for her feeling she was in the middle of a:

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

The women from the RERC database describe sin as: I “went to hear a bishop preach and realised why Christ had died and the reality of sin” (RERC 000225). After listening to an eminent preacher, I was “greatly moved and wept copiously” (RERC 000250). Aged nineteen she “realised she was a sinner and she needed to repent as Christ had died for her” (RERC 000292).

Of the two men who were interviewed, only one made reference to sin within his life. His conversion occurred when he was twelve. He acknowledges that, “It might sound strange that a twelve-year-old son of a minister would see himself as a great sinner but it’s true in the sense that the heart doesn’t have to have committed things to have the potential within it” (Participant 6). The male responders within the RERC database describe in a similar way, a “crushing sense of sin” (RERC 000256), “you cannot serve God and mammon” (RERC 000285), and regarding the way in which God can forgive sins, one man wrote of how his “understanding of how Jesus is God and can forgive sins, deepened” (RERC 000340). These examples show that there are some differences between the way in which women describe the need to be cleansed of their sin whilst men describe a requirement to abstain from sin. The next section examines the differences that exist between women and men’s accounts of their relationships with God.

Participant 2 (a woman) when talking about her conversion experience describes how she “felt like Jesus Christ was almost embracing me all the way round.” When asked about what her relationship with God is now, she said, “Before you were in darkness and now you are in light and you have this relationship you didn’t have.” “Almost like this person you never knew is [...] Like having somebody that you write to over the internet, the difference is that you can actually embrace somebody in real life.” “It was a mixture of relief and peace.” “I felt like really light, I felt like a bird.” Reflecting on what was happening prior to the experience, she states: “I think that slowly, God was working in my heart.” This participant describes God using paternalistic, father-like terms. This paternalism is similar to the description used by Participant 4, below.

The women’s accounts from the RERC database include the following impressions of God following their conversion experience: “Without warning God coming down to meet and envelop me, awe-inspiring, yet a completely warm and loving Father, forgiveness, giving me certainty and security”; “Perfect love, perfect peace”; “fear gone” (RERC 000001). “I felt a power outside myself,” “I knew that God had spoken to me” (RERC 000079). “I have peace in my heart” (RERC 000102).

By way of comparison, of the male participants who were interviewed, Participant 3 said that his conversion was “very real, but it wasn’t that I had lots of feelings, I just believed that I had become a Christian.” “The moral and ethical side of me was changing

to a Christ like figure.” That is, “The nature of God is pure, good and just.” In contrast, Participant 6 did feel emotion during his conversion, he “cried to the Lord”; he describes feeling a “powerful presence in my heart and [God] had heard my cry and had answered my prayer and I was forgiven”; “I had a sense of peace.” Examples from the RERC database are as follows: “There was a sudden freeing within and a swift indescribable illumination of mind, so subjectively vivid that I fancied a change even in the light around me”; “An exquisite sense of relief and peace”; “A new deep belief in the existence of God” (RERC 000221).

It can be seen that there is a gendered element of giving oneself to God in a more passive way as a woman. Men do not describe God in the same way, though there is an acknowledgment that God can “flow through you.” Following their religious experience, many of the RERC database accounts from both genders describe feeling peaceful and feelings of relief. Women and men refer to a belief or knowledge that God loves them; they describe Him as being more powerful than human beings. However, seen as a whole, the narratives of men tend to be less emotional. Women describe their experience in a more physical way, relating the way in which God or Jesus has touched them. For women, the evidence suggests their attachment to and dependence on God in a hetero-normative way, as a paternal or husband like figure. The men did not use similar metaphors. God helped women feel complete and enabled men to feel fulfilled. The insight confirms Tanya van Wyk’s argument that “Language does not only create and shape beliefs about gender, but language also maintains it” (van Wyk, 2018). In this context, it can be seen that there is a difference in the way in which one of the female participants views God as a father like figure and the way in which one of the male participants views himself as becoming more of a Christ like figure.

Participant 6 indicated during his interview that conversion experiences are the same for both women as men, he qualified this by stating that the New Testament regarded women and men as equals, “I would take the line, if it [conversion] was different, you would expect to see a difference in the Scripture as well. Our experiences in the Scripture do match up.” There are references within the New Testament which demonstrate the interviewee’s statement. For example, Galatians 3.28, is a well-known text which has been used to support an argument that there is gender balance with the gospels (Crandell, 2012, p. 120), “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Ostensibly, this text appears to proffer the same rights to women and men. To contextualise this, generally when the New Testament was written, women and men were not treated as equals. Colleen Conway writes stating that during the historical time when Jesus lived, men were considered to be higher in rank than a woman (Conway, 2008, p. 15). She argues that during this period there was a strict hierarchy of

nationalities and gender, women were ranked below all men with the exception of slaves. Therefore, although Jesus might have had relationships with women, it is doubtful that those relationships would have been based upon equality.

The interviewed participants used the bible as a means to compare experiences of gender and, despite being written over two thousand years ago, it is still, for evangelical Christians, a living document upon which they base their lives. This provides further explanation as to why gender differences are not obvious. The gendered roles of those in the New Testament mirror those adopted by the interviewed participants. These roles did not appear to be questioned by those within the church. This acceptance of gendered roles is similar to the study referenced in the literature review conducted by Davidman and Griel (1993) who interviewed women and men within Jewish families. They observed that there are differences within the traditional roles of both genders. The differences between the gendered roles of women and men will be further explored later in this chapter via the work of Judith Butler.

Gender Relationship

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

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

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

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

“Certainly, you know, a woman would be naturally more tender, and a man tends to be a bit more, masculine, you know. But when you actually look into it, it

doesn't quite work out like that. We might express it in different ways, but it is actually talking about the same thing."

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

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

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

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

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

Although participant 6 was able to recognise there is a difference between genders, overall, there was no acknowledgment that the conversion experience is different for women and men. The reason for this needs to be explored. Why is it difficult to perceive of the cultural constraints and limitations that are placed on women and men given that one lives within a cultural structure which is designed to perceive one as being either 'female' or 'male.' This is especially so as the language that is used to describe gender differences is discerned as being comprehensively logical and impartial. This point is particularly important with regard to the conversion experiences of the interviewed participants who base their frame of reference on the composition of aspects of the New Testament which focuses on a requirement to acknowledge that one is a sinner. The need

to acknowledge sin is of such great importance that any difference in the way it is conducted is lost or ignored.

The work of Judith Butler can be used to offer an insight into the reasons for the apparent invisibility of these differences. Butler's work gives an indication as to why participants felt that their experiences were not gendered. Butler acknowledges that gender is a culturally constructed concept and provides a philosophical basis for this tenet. She explores whether gender is something which we can choose to have some control over, "a form of choice" (Butler, 1999, p. 12). Butler argues that traditionally, the position of women has been separated from "class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations," so it has been assumed and argued by feminists that women are intrinsically different to men (Butler, 1999, p. 7). She asks then whether one can take on the qualities of what is assumed to be masculine or feminine and whether gender is a choice (Butler, 1999, p. 12)? Furthermore, Butler writes that there are limits to the way in which the constructed nature of gender is perceived, this is because "these limits are always set within the terms of hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (Butler, 1999, p. 13). Butler's theory can be used to offer insight into why participants were unable to perceive a gender difference.

Butler writes that one 'performs' gender, she does not mean that one has agency within 'doing,' Butler is clear that one 'performs' without free will or insight into the gendered role one has adopted (Butler, 2004, p.1). Butler argues that the concept of 'I' is a social construct, 'I' only exists within the poststructuralist theory that 'I' is a signification of language. If this is the case, then neither 'I' nor 'gender' can exist outside of language or cultural construction. Moreover, gender identity cannot precede language, this is Butler's rationale for 'doing' gender rather than 'being' a gender. The participants were unable to step outside their life or ordinary use of language.

Butler's theory demonstrates why the interviewed participants might have felt that their experiences were non gendered, in that the participants are not aware of their differences as their cultural norms are not only rooted in the present but also link to the two thousand year old New Testament.

Notably, the conversion experiences of those interviewed are interpreted directly through the New Testament; because of this, gender differences were not discernibly obvious to those who were interviewed. None of the individuals who contributed to the RERC database made any reference to gender differences within their experiences; though it must be acknowledged that this is something which Alister Hardy did not solicit. Gendered roles are so rooted in our culture that differences are not always easy to perceive as they cannot be detached from everyday life experiences.

The interviewed participants and examples from the RERC database described their experience of conversion using language that had clear gendered differences in the way that the relationship with God is conceived. This difference is subtle and not necessarily apparent to those who are church members. Women make use of different metaphors to describe their conversion experience. They generally use language that is more paternalistic, describing God in terms of a father-like figure and experiencing their emotions in a physical manner. Both women and men find it difficult to recognise any gender differences within their conversion experience, this is because they see and describe it from a biblical perspective. Judith Butler argues that language and culture cannot be separated from gender and one has to “perform” one’s gender. It is therefore impossible to step outside of a gendered experience. Women are important, but not equal to men. Therefore, their experience of conversion must be different to that of men as they maintain different cultural positions from men.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The general aim of the study was to explore whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men within Christianity. There was no evidence of gender based differences within conversion or relationship with God when conversion models devised by Henri Gooren or Lewis Rambo were applied to the study.

A further aim of the research was to establish why it is important to understand that there is a difference between the gendered experiences of women and men, to identify why this occurs; and to determine the impact that it has on women’s lives within Christianity. As suggested by the evidence above, unexpectedly it appeared that gendered experiences, at least superficially, appeared to be very similar with little to distinguish with regard to the anticipated differences. The original hypothesis was that as gender plays a role in all aspects of our lives, there would be clear differences displayed in women and men’s conversion experiences. Further analysis was conducted to establish the reasons for this apparent incongruity.

There was evidence to show that women and men use different language to describe their conversion experiences. Gendered differences are embedded in our cultural and physical lives, so much so that they are not always obvious or discernible. There was evidence that the way in which women and men use language to describe their experience of God is different. There is a gendered element of giving oneself to God in a more passive way as a woman. Women and men refer to a belief or knowledge that God loves them; they describe Him as being more powerful than human beings. However, seen as a whole, the narratives of men tend to be less emotional. Women describe their

experience in a more physical way, relating the way in which God or Jesus has touched them. For women, the evidence suggests their attachment to and dependence on God in a hetero-normative way, as a paternal or husband-like figure. The men did not use similar metaphors. God helped women feel complete and enable men to feel fulfilled. There is some evidence that men use different words to women, such as “crushing” and “surging,” while women use words such as “certainty” and “security.”

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

This section demonstrates that, spiritually, the conversion experience is the same for women as for men. However, as explained by Judith Butler, culturally, human beings are conditioned to understand relationships between women and men in fixed ways that are linked to the environment they live in. The evidence demonstrates that the power differentials between women and men are either ignored, downplayed or considered as natural.

To summarise, the study demonstrates that conversion as defined by those within Evangelical churches is interpreted directly through the gospel tradition. Therefore, when examined superficially, there is little to suggest a difference in gendered experience of conversion. However, when explored in detail it has been clearly proven that contrasts exist within the use of language and gendered roles. The difference between women and men is embedded so deeply within our culture that it is not obvious and can be difficult to recognise.

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