

INTRODUCTION

Lynne was disgusted just thinking about her daughter dating a preacher.¹ “The idea that she could even consider it makes me sick! After all that I’ve told her and all that she’s been exposed to.” Lynne’s frustration was evident in the tone of her voice and the contortions of her face. Nearly the first half of our interview seemed to center on her disapproval of her daughter’s romantic choice. For Lynne, preachers and their theologies are the main problem with black communities in Halifax County, and by extension the majority of other black communities. While her daughter, a distinguished judge in another part of the state, no longer lives in Halifax, Lynne’s distrust of the ministry reaches far beyond the confines of this rural area. She could not help but go into a detailed description of the short, well-groomed, rhetoric-spouting minister. He had thoroughly irritated her upon their first meeting. For Lynne, self-indulgence—a preoccupation with image, authority, and money—causes ministers to hinder the type of progressive impact that the church could have. Women who participate in the church, in Lynne’s estimation, have their lives and frustrations with the social order curtailed into benevolence instead of anger.

In a memoir that Lynne helped a young high school student write, the idea comes across clearly. The student’s celebration of his grandmother’s influence in his life seems at least a partial reflection of Lynne’s own misgivings about the church. “My grandmother is my superstar,” he writes. “She is such a woman of mystery and strength. Always there for us. Always making a way for us. God seems to guide her every purpose. Then

again, she could be a tower of anger and despair . . . Her voice muted by the culture, by the church and by her beliefs in God.” The final lines echo the hours of interview time I spent with Lynne. Based upon her lifetime of fighting injustice in the county and beyond, she believes that when the response should be indignation the church instead channels women’s voices into prayers for peace and acts of benevolence. For years she has worked to get women involved with her type of politics—bold, confrontational, impolite, *honest*. The daughter of well-respected farmers severely mistreated by the government, she was molded into an activist from an early age. She counts her success in converting women to her views as slow but steady—her own politics and beliefs (especially about God) sometimes making her more of an eccentric than a leader in this small community. Nevertheless, she is revered and respected as a woman who stands her ground and comes to the aid of those in need. For the past several years she has diligently cared for her ailing parents, making sure that her mother receives her nighttime bath and that her father takes his medicine and eats healthy meals to regulate his diabetes. Her mother’s wanderings in the middle of the night and ornery mood swings leave her drained and frustrated—experiencing the type of exhaustion only those who have cared for Alzheimer’s patients understand. Though she remains concerned with the problems of society, most of her time now is consumed by household responsibilities. Nevertheless, she still tries to dedicate some of her labor to outside efforts.

She once married a death-row inmate and traveled across country on the back of a truck with a bullhorn to publicly ridicule the inhumanity of the death sentence. The disproportionate use of capital punishment for black and poor inmates makes the punishment that much more intolerable to Lynne. I could only imagine the slim possibility of any of the women of faith that she described taking such a bold and outrageous step—not just carrying the bullhorn across the country, but marrying the likes of a death-row inmate—completely jeopardizing the image of “respectability” so valued in most churches. This particular campaign of Lynne’s, however, dated from nearly twenty years ago. Her most recent action was one in a list of smaller protests that highlight her keen sensitivity toward situations she perceives as unjust.

She sent a petition around town to have a man kicked out of the community. After receiving notice from the courts that he was required to pay child support for his two young daughters, he had posted a sign on both sides of his small red pick-up truck saying that he would never pay anybody’s child support. Enraged by his intolerable rejection of his fa-

therly responsibilities, Lynne decided that he was no longer welcome. She responded with a petition: "We, the Citizens of Tillery, hereby no longer welcome William Thomas [pseudonym] in our community. His actions do not reflect our community's spirit. They are offensive and abusive towards women and children and we will not tolerate it . . ." Some people signed, some did not. In this small, closely knit town on the outskirts of the county seat, almost all the residents are members of one of the seven churches that line the main street. Some thought it "un-Christian" to send around a petition reviling the name of someone in the community; others thought it "un-Christian" of him not to pay his child support and thus found themselves justified in signing.

Although seemingly harsh, Lynne's critique of the church and the impact of faith upon how people respond to certain issues merits discussion. In our need as social scientists to discuss the significance of gender, race, and class for how people experience and act in the world, we neglect to consider seriously the impact of spirituality on such practices. Lynne's frustrations thus remind us of the profound influence of faith upon actions. Whether related to how people respond to signing a petition, or how people become involved in community work, or how they spend their money, or how they relate sexually to their partners, *among the faith-filled*, faith in God navigates how individuals respond to almost all of life's circumstances.

While Lynne was speaking more about the practice of faith outside of the church, her critique reflects concerns that others have long had over the inside workings of the institution. Lynne is one who finds the teachings and practices of the church stifling. Years ago she removed herself completely from the institution, renouncing her faith. Other women, while seeing and often sharing some of her concerns, have chosen to stay within the church *and* hold to their faith. Skeptics like Lynne wonder why women remain in an institution that often curtails their leadership and silences their voices. Women's ministerial leadership is often undervalued, and more often than not women are absent from powerful decision-making bodies in the church, like the deacon and trustee boards.²

During an interview I had with one female minister in the county, the clergywoman despairingly recalled her struggles to be recognized as a minister in the Baptist ministerial alliance. Because her own association refused to ordain her, she had to travel to another North Carolina association for ordination. Although she is now a recognized minister in the Baptist tradition, those who opposed her ordination find other ways to prove their point. When she visits churches pastored by them, they rarely

extend to her an invitation to join with other clergy as pulpit guests. These small acts of intolerance toward women ministers along with the relative absence of women in the business and financial decisions of the church raise numerous questions among those concerned about equitable distributions of power in the church. Further, the abuse of women at the hands of “preachers that prey” as one minister terms it³—an allusion to some ministers’ sexual improprieties—makes a discussion of women and faith even more urgent.

In spite of the problems within the church, women not only remain members, they worship, participate, teach Sunday school, usher on the ushers’ board, give their tithe, form community outreaches, and in a large sense undergird the entire operation of the church.⁴ It is common knowledge that regardless of race or socioeconomic background women form the backbone of most religious organizations in the United States. Leading womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant suggests that male leadership in churches celebrates women as the “backbone” of the church in order to keep them in the “background.”⁵ Similarly, the simple title of Cheryl Townsend Gilkes’s work on church women, *If It Wasn’t for the Women*, leaves the reader with little doubt in answering the hypothetical: If it wasn’t for the women, *there would be no church*. Yet while the inner dynamic of church life is often far from ideal, women continue to worship God and contribute to the overarching aims and missions of their local church bodies. They move beyond the problems and limitations of the church to full participation not because the church is perfect, but because their churches form valuable community networks that foster mutual support, nurture individual gifts, and validate individual identities. Furthermore, women participate because their faith is real—complicated but real.

The presence of women reflects at some points their acceptance of male-centered theologies of female subordination, as well as their larger commitments to the community in which the church resides and their social relationships within the church. Most important, however, their commitment reflects a level of faith that encourages a desire to be a part of what they consider God’s work wherever and however it is taking place. Often this work takes place within the church; even more frequently, however, it takes place in everyday situations outside of the church. Women’s expressions of faith reflect what I refer to as their spirituality—their understanding of God and God’s work in their day-to-day lives. Spirituality in discernible ways embodies both the personal and public areas of life. In this book I discuss women’s experiences of faith

that reach beyond the preparation and execution of the Sunday morning worship service, what takes place “Between Sundays.”

RESISTANCE AND ACCOMMODATION

Lynne’s critique raises several issues. First, her suggestion that faith and the church work against women’s radical expressions of anger and indignation reflects part of a larger debate within the study of African American religion. Theologians and scholars of religion have for years debated the accommodation versus resistance practices of “the black church,” as dynamic and varied as these historic institutions are. Much of this debate, however, focuses on the ways in which the church fights against the racist practices of society. Very little of the discussion turns on questions of sexism within the church itself. Resistance and accommodation are seen largely as subjects for the analysis of racism, not sexism. Nevertheless, the history of the resistance/accommodation debate illuminates a discussion of how the church serves as a source of strength and empowerment for people of faith.

The social unrest of the sixties led to revisionist work which attempts to incorporate the ideals of black social power within an understanding of black religious traditions.⁶ Over the past several decades there has been a shift in focus from viewing black faith as one embedded in escapist theology⁷—a compulsion to find joy and peace in the world to come—to viewing it as a faith which acknowledges the power of practitioners to not only endure, but also resist structures of oppression. This revisionist work began to reconceptualize the relationship between religion and social protest, ultimately demonstrating how religion serves as a means of both “social relief and social protest.”⁸

Some even suggest that it is precisely this tension between accommodation and resistance that sets African American religious practice apart from the varieties of influential African and European traditions.⁹ Gayraud Wilmore, a scholar of African American religion, notes that black religion “began in Africa, was mixed with European Christianity in the Caribbean and Latin America, and was further molded by and recoiled from American evangelical Protestantism on the slave plantations of the South,” and suggests that “an exceedingly elastic but tenacious thread binds together the contributive and developmental factors of black religion in the US as one distinctive social phenomenon,” its radicalism.¹⁰ While one can acknowledge the validity of this position, it is nevertheless important to point out that the tradition of accommodation

is equally salient in the history of African American Christianity.¹¹ Many African Americans were not radicalized by their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, much of African American religious experience has involved some degree of capitulation or accommodation in the face of unequal structures of power. Which view one holds is largely predicated upon how one defines accommodation and resistance. Lest we forget, numerous black churches and church members opposed any involvement by the church in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. These were seen as social concerns and not necessarily the responsibility of local church bodies.

While not wanting to leave the terms “accommodation” and “resistance” entirely behind, I nevertheless feel that they largely fail to capture the complexity of the everyday lives of the practitioners I know. Although for the most part seen by critics like Lynne as accommodating to structures of oppression, women’s lives are not easily placed on a binary continuum measuring political or apolitical activity alone. Instead, they manifest a diversity of belief, an often contradictory set of commitments, and a depth of religious engagements that defy easy either/or labels.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, a historian whose work on African American women has opened new and interesting ways of understanding women’s history at the turn of the twentieth century, argues that such attempts at dichotomizing the faith experiences of women believers elide the varied dynamics of black faith. “Arguments over the accommodationist versus liberating thrust of the black church miss the range as well as the fluid interaction of political and ideological meanings represented within the church’s domain. Equally important, the artificiality of such a dichotomy precludes appreciation of the church’s role in the ‘prosaic and constant struggle’ of black people for survival and empowerment.”¹²

Eugene Genovese similarly argues that even in the historical interpretation of African American slave experiences one must try to challenge the “mechanistic error of assuming that religion either sparked the slaves to rebellion or rendered them docile.”¹³ Instead one must examine the “creative impulse” among slaves that allowed them to “blend ideas from diverse sources into the formulation of a world-view sufficiently complex to link acceptance of what had to be endured with a determined resistance to the pressures for despair and dehumanization.”¹⁴ Both Genovese’s notion of the melding together of ideas and Higginbotham’s understanding of the “‘prosaic and constant struggle’ of black people for survival and empowerment” are important in creating a paradigm for interpreting African American women’s spirituality.

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Second, Lynne's suggestion that the church *itself* has hindered black progress raises questions of how institutions or structures affect people's activism or sense of agency. How free are women to work against not only the sexist language of the church, but the racist baggage of institutions like the school system, or corporations that employ minority laborers in low-level and often dangerous positions? Do institutions have the final say, or are women able to work within and against structures to effect change? Furthermore, what is meant by agency? Must agency be limited to only that which engages politics? Or when we say "agency" are we also referring to the ways in which women through empathetic and caring activities create communities of strength and healing?

There are everyday forms of resistance that people use that do not necessarily require organizing for direct protest; nevertheless, they demonstrate opposition to the status quo or to practices with which they disagree.¹⁵ The pastor's refusal to welcome female ministers into his pulpit, though sexist to many, is one such example of "small acts" of resistance. Although he cannot prevent women's ordinations, he hinders their participation on a level that he can manipulate.

Sometimes, however, people take little interest in resistance per se and begin channeling their energies in other directions. In these instances confronting the institution is not the ultimate goal of those who feel limited by institutional barriers. The tradition of self-help so ensconced in African American religious history has been about the establishment of schools, community centers, orphanages, senior homes, and other places of refuge and development. The day-to-day activities in these facilities work against outside forces of oppression through education, training, and nurturance. The act of creating thus becomes their demonstration of agency. Creativity, then, *is* their form of resistance. Women who work in these places do not resist politically or with confrontation; instead, in the midst of struggle, they create lives and sustain communities and develop opportunities for success. In her work on women community workers, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes points out the ways in which black women serve and restore their communities through education and activities that affirm their social traditions and validate their history.¹⁶ Given the obstacles these women must overcome to participate, these acts, though not always protest-oriented, are nonetheless agitative.

In trying to tease out the relationship between structure and agency, anthropologists Sherry Ortner and Nicholas Dirks along with historian

Geoff Eley expand on the idea of “practice theory.”¹⁷ This theory of practice “hold[s] together all three sides of the [theoretical] triangle: that society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction.”¹⁸ Examining power often causes one to see it either as a tool of the social system in recreating inequitable social relations or as a form of resistance by which people respond to oppression. The tendency to overdetermine either position decreases one’s ability to see the ways structures and agents are often intimately connected in processes of power replication. Within a practice framework, there is an attempt to merge structure with agency and draw attention to the power relations that operate within social systems.¹⁹

In her work on evangelical women and submission, R. Marie Griffith addresses this concern by looking at the myriad ways in which women’s prayer lives move them to places of submission as well as spaces of resistance.²⁰ Religious doctrine often encourages women to submit to pastors and husbands, who are understood as having religious authority over them. Yet while women submit, they simultaneously resist requests or petitions that appear to them antithetical to biblical principles. As women negotiate these tensions, they experience transformation. By unraveling the complexity of evangelical women’s submission, Griffith works to create a theory of practice that holds together all three sides of Dirks et al.’s theoretical triangle.

Spirituality’s role in resolving these theoretical tensions is recognized in its creative agency. Women respond to the day-to-day issues in their lives by transforming not only institutions, but also themselves. Thus, much of spirituality’s work takes place on the public level, with women openly contesting unjust laws and practices and creating communities of love and support, as well as on the individual level, as women redefine their personal goals and boundaries, deciding with whom they will or will not engage in sexual activity and how they will or will not distribute their money.

THE BLACK PUBLIC SPHERE

Finally, Lynne’s emphasis upon the type of power that the black church has to effect change in the community highlights the significance of the black public sphere. Such a sphere, where critical debate about issues relating to African American public life takes place, has historically been found in the black church.²¹ Thus, the financial resources, facilities, and

security of the church have all contributed to making it a central component in organizational and protest efforts. The need for the church to perform this function has been tied directly to the United States's history of racism and exclusion.

African Americans, experiencing exclusion from public debate, have historically cultivated space in black churches, women's clubs, and various social and political organizations to address openly and critically issues pertaining to themselves.²² The black public sphere was central to the organizing efforts of African American women at the turn of the last century.²³ Such a space allowed for not only the discussion of critical issues, but also the distribution of resources and establishment of schools and care facilities in the black community. The significance of a black public sphere today, however, hinges on whether or not racism in a post-civil rights era is perceived by blacks as a real threat to African American progress. Differences in locale, economic progress, social mobility, and educational attainment each inform this perception. While many feel that racism is a major problem facing African Americans, a growing number of civic and religious leaders are beginning to reject race as an explanation for the concerns challenging African American communities. This growing conservative chorus, moved largely by calls for individual responsibility, points to the passage of civil rights laws and an expanding African American middle class as evidence that race is declining in significance. While William Julius Wilson popularized this phrase with his 1978 book focusing on the significance of class in social inequality, numerous conservative and neo-conservative thinkers, such as Shelby Steele, John McWhorter, and Thomas Sowell, along with conservative-leaning television preachers who point to the power of the holy spirit to circumvent the challenges of race, have adopted this idea to direct attention away from a need to organize around race and instead exercise personal ingenuity or faith to progress in contemporary America. Louis Farrakhan's "Million Man March" aimed at getting black men to assume "personal responsibility" for their current social condition is a key example, according to historian Robin D. G. Kelley, of the type of "culture wars" that are being fought in American politics today.²⁴

Recognizing this shift, Steven Gregory and Michael Dawson, both empathetic to current challenges of racism, argue that the black public sphere reached its functional climax prior to desegregation.²⁵ Based on his research in New York, Gregory explains that since the seventies, the black public sphere has been reorganized and its ability to place explicit emphasis upon the problems of race has been compromised. Class re-

structuring along with the growth of post-1960s governmental bureaucracies, organized to address race issues, have preempted such discussions.²⁶ The emergence of diverse ethnic communities and a focus on multiculturalism have further complicated the idea of race and racialized politics in urban centers. In these new discussions, “race,” which refers to socially constructed categories based historically on a system guaranteeing the inequitable distribution of power and economic benefit, has been subsumed by discussions of “culture,” which refers more loosely to differences in history, language, religion, food, dress, and other learned ways of knowing. My own research indicates, however, that a black public sphere today in Halifax County has not been drastically reorganized. While some rural areas, like many urban centers, have experienced a substantial increase in Spanish-speaking migrant and factory workers, Halifax County and rural regions like it have not experienced the type of drastic increases in ethnic communities that would seriously reshape their historic racial demographics. Public politics are still largely framed as “black and white,” although class increasingly complicates this binary.

Evidenced by the interdependence that women have with institutions like black churches, civic organizations, and grassroots activist organizations, black public spheres create important and effective means for women to express righteous discontent with unjust social orders. The sustainability of the black church in Halifax County as a vibrant black public sphere, however, is largely dependent upon its ability to maintain a critical discourse around race, sex, and economics in the face of competing discourses.

RETHINKING SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is central to my inquiry because, for the African American women I came to know, it often motivates their social interactions and is directly connected to their everyday political and economic realities. These realities limit and define the issues they bring before God, the choices they make, and the ways in which they live out their spirituality. If religion and its constituent parts convey “order” and the saliency of social institutions, spirituality conveys creativity, the ability to invent, to reinterpret, to move beyond some of the limitations of ritual and static notions of religiosity. The agency that spirituality confers allows for active work in the public areas of life as well as the more private areas.

The way people use the term “spirituality” evokes countless ideas

about what spirituality is. For some a more general understanding of spirituality focuses exclusively on the individual without a connection to institutions and institutional responsibilities. Writing about feminist spirituality, for example, Cynthia Eller explains that many (predominately white) women involved in this movement disconnect themselves from religious institutions in order to concentrate more fully on their new-found connection with the universe.²⁷

This type of spirituality runs counter to the idea of spirituality held by most religious traditions, which rely on shared text, shared doctrine, and shared institutional protocol. While noting that individualism dictates many forms of Christian spirituality, Robert Wuthnow complicates the idea of spirituality in his work on Christian support groups.²⁸ These smaller groups, which often take the form of at-home Bible studies or before-work prayer meetings, encourage members collectively toward deeper spiritual growth by stressing the biblical text and encouraging participation in a larger church body. Nevertheless, these groups also often fall prey to what Wuthnow terms a growing form of secular spirituality:

At one time, theologians argued that the chief purpose of humankind was to glorify God. Now it would seem that the logic has been reversed: the chief purpose of God is to glorify humankind. Spirituality no longer is true or good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness but because it helps us get along. We are the judge of its worth. If it helps us find a vacant parking space, we know that our spirituality is on the right track. If it leads us into the wilderness, calling on us to face dangers we would rather not deal with, then it is a form of spirituality we are unlikely to choose.²⁹

In a sense what Wuthnow is questioning is the growing individualism found in various forms of Christian spirituality, the idea that the goal and aim of God is to meet individual wants and needs socially, professionally, or financially. Like more traditional Christian orthodoxy, which rejects such individualism, much of the feminist movement proper rejects the growth of feminist spirituality because it is similarly seen as apolitical and narcissistic. According to Eller, "Criticism of feminist spirituality as insufficiently political has come in several guises. Probably the most common critique is that spirituality is overly personal and can therefore never address the concerns of women as a class. Feminist spirituality is at best a waste of time and at worst a serious distraction from more important political pursuits; it may help individual women, but it does not have the power to change the status of all women."³⁰ These issues of individualism raise significant questions about the reach and influence of

spirituality. For the women I interviewed, nurtured in black church traditions, spirituality tries to make broad appeals to the common good of society as well as addressing the personal needs of women. In a sense for those who feel that their faith is becoming more focused upon themselves, there is a constant edge of concern, a feeling that they at least “should be” doing something more for others, that their faith walk “should include” larger sacrifices, both political and social. For others, authentic Christian spirituality is a mandate to community involvement and political activism. Continuously in struggle with the varied dynamics of their faith, the women that I interviewed actively work at balancing spirituality’s social, political, and personal mandates in their lives.

This idea of spirituality also moves beyond romantic notions of an exclusively political and radical black faith because it allows for what some refer to as desires that may seem “antithetical to power”—for love, for tenderness, for communion.³¹ Women’s refashioning of their world may not always coincide with traditional interpretations of radical politics; nevertheless, the communities they create and the life changes they inspire speak to the agentive possibilities of their faith. Historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Judith Weisenfeld, and Bettye Collier-Thomas, in telling the life stories of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, address the general questions of faith (the need for grace, forgiveness, faith, and peace) in black women’s lives while simultaneously wrestling with how these issues are complicated for women living in a society that places immediate race, gender, and class obstacles before them. Though their writings talk about activism as a way of exploring the relationship between women’s spirituality and the public sphere throughout American history, they also try to explain women’s more personal concerns about propriety and personal responsibility. Higginbotham and Weisenfeld look at how African American women at the turn of the century worked within the National Baptist Convention, the Black Women’s Club Movement, and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in order to effect change within both the church and the community. Their work with poor women and children often involved building schools and orphanages and teaching women the more domestic etiquettes of cleanliness and wifely responsibilities. Collier-Thomas explores the history of struggle related to women ascending to the privileged position of minister, evangelist, or pastor. Her work includes not only histories, but also sermons of women who preached in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their sermons these women simultaneously critiqued social ills, such as slavery, Jim Crow, and lynch-

ings, while calling for Christian men and women to live holy and pleasing lives before God. Such biographical and autobiographical accounts address issues of how African American women have “made decisions, how their religious and moral values informed their participation in social issues, and how their spirituality interacted with their social conscience.”³²

These works, in exploring the activist nature of black women’s faith, wrestle with the influence that the women’s faith has on the less public areas of their lives, often their experiences as wives and mothers, where tangible and overt forms of power are less noticeable. In the pursuit of “respectability” in a society that deemed black women hyper-sexual jezebels or asexual matriarchs,³³ the Black Women’s Club Movement of the early 1900s interjected key dialogue about marriage and sexuality which at the time served to redeem black womanhood from derogatory white social commentary. These issues, though seemingly private, weigh heavily in any discussion of black women’s experience in a race- and gender-conscious United States. This more personal dynamic of women’s lives is crucial in a holistic evaluation of faith. How does one’s faith influence one’s activism from without as well as one’s activism from within?

Whereas Higginbotham, Weisenfeld, and Collier-Thomas explore the historic significance of spirituality in women’s lives, this book looks at the role of spirituality in the lives of contemporary women. Given the close relationship between spirituality and activism in the history of black faith, how is this relationship manifested in the lives of contemporary believers whose experiences with unjust systems fall more under what sociologist Howard Winant calls a regime of racial hegemony—where racism is less overt—as opposed to one of racial dominance—where racism manifests itself in open displays of hostility and hatred?³⁴ How might the more personal dynamics of women’s spirituality—those relating to marriage, family, and finances—demonstrate new forms of activism or old forms of gender oppression? Ultimately, how *does* spirituality inform women’s experiences in a raced, classed, and gendered society such as the United States today?

SPIRITUALITY IN PRACTICE

Although literature on spirituality in the African American context of Christianity is largely focused on the political dynamics of faith, I argue that spirituality for the women I interviewed is more than a source of cul-

tural identity and a means of expressing political allegiance, though both themes emerge in their life stories. Spirituality is about living through moments of struggle and moments of peace and ultimately acquiring a better life, a life that is filled with a deeper knowledge of God. This better life comes from the onset of not only public political confrontation but also personal affirmation and development over time. In setting the works of scholars of African American faith against interpretations of African American women's stories, I aim to show their areas of overlap and establish an understanding of spirituality sufficiently nuanced to interpret these women's lives and life experiences.

Spirituality is a process of engagement with God that informs the thoughts, motivations, and actions of individuals. There is a difference between religion or "religiosity" and "spirituality" as defined by the women that I interviewed. Though the two are not mutually exclusive, they ultimately convey different meanings. Unlike religion, which is often seen as embedded in structures and repetitive ritual practices, spirituality conveys process. Spirituality evokes the idea of maturation over time, not simply repetitive religious engagement. These women I know develop depths of spirituality over time and in relationship to the various circumstances of their lives. Spirituality is thus not something that just happens at a certain age and remains the same forever. Instead, it is a process that ebbs and flows with the development of individuals.

For the women I interviewed, spirituality is personal and experiential. It is, as one of them put it, that which "comes from inside the person and it's a reflection of how they live." Spirituality, said another, is reflected in a "person that's aware, a person that cares, a person that tries to practice being a Christian." It encompasses a process of thought, concern, and action that affirms one's identity as a Christian. One who is spiritual possesses a knowledge of "the Word," "what the Word says," and an awareness of the community and its concerns. Along with knowledge, "concern" is a recurring theme. One who is spiritual is concerned about others and is especially concerned about what God thinks. Finally, spirituality consists of action, reflected in how one treats others and how one follows "the direction of the Holy Spirit."³⁵

Without any one of these components, one is simply religious but not spiritual. As Sylvia Jones, one of my respondents, explained, religious people "are the ones that's always, 'Praise the Lord. Hallelujah!' And will talk about you before you leave their presence." For her, when one's actions contradict what one has spoken, one is merely religious, thus demonstrating a lack of genuine concern for the individual. Likewise,

Carmen Moore spoke of religiosity as routine. "Religious to me is just going through the motions. You know, you are affiliated with this church. Some people say they're Baptists. Some people say they're Methodist . . . But, to me, you can be religious about going to church. You can be religious about getting involved in things in the church." Marie Carter reiterated a similar concern, comparing religiosity to her work schedule. "Religion is like I get up and go to work religiously *every* day—and you know routine. Religious I look at as routine. Spiritual is when you worship; you worship Him in spirit and in truth. Religion is something totally different."³⁶ In each of these scenarios the absence of a genuine concern about God and the things of God results in the routinization of religious practices.

It can be assumed that the presence of concern and action in the absence of knowledge can lead to empathetic activity but not to the acknowledgment of God necessary for spirituality. As Gloria McKnight told me, "I became spiritual about two years ago because I was in the church. I did the thing that 'Christian' people are supposed to do. You know religious people do this. But, I didn't have God in my heart." Likewise, the presence of thought and concern without action invalidates the earnestness of one's commitment to spirituality. As Carmen Moore suggested, "Faith without works is dead!"

"Religion," according to theologian Flora Wilson Bridges, "teaches humankind to appreciate God's love; but spirituality challenges human beings to directly experience the transformative power of God's love . . . Religion may enlighten the mind, but spirituality converts the entire existence."³⁷ This type of spirituality requires a mind, soul, and body connection, where the body acts out what it knows mentally and spiritually. Therefore, missing from the women's understandings is any reference to institutional practice. The women focus on the individual as bearer of that which is spiritual, not the church, nor rituals of the church. This is not to underplay the significance of the church in their spiritual development. Rather it emphasizes the significance of the individual believer's experience and actions once church is over.

Knowledge, concern, and action are central to any understanding of how these women respond to particular situations in their lives. True spirituality will involve all three elements. While spirituality for these women intersects with feminist spirituality in its search for a better understanding of self and a larger connection to the Creator, it in obvious ways stands apart from critical interpretations of feminist spirituality. For the women I interviewed in Halifax, spirituality is rooted in the bib-