Bodies that Matter to God: A feminist theory of religious performativity applied to the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual movement

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Abstract

Judith Butler revolutionized feminist thought through her theory of gender performance, especially through her book Bodies that Matter, which emphasized how bodies are materialized into intelligibility by discursive means. An aspect that merits more attention is how a theory of performativity can help us to understand religion’s role in this materialization and valuing of bodies. This article proposes a theory of religious performativity based on a conception of agency that takes seriously the additional role of a transcendent agent for the religious person and is, therefore, distinct from Butler. The feminist-based theory is then applied to two documents from complementarian evangelical Christian women within a movement called #SilenceIsNotSpiritual, in order to offer deeper understanding of a predominantly self-identified non-feminist population. This analysis suggests a subtle shift of power is taking place as these women enact their agency, while also highlighting the intricate differences of this movement from the #MeToo movement.

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On December 20, 2017 a statement under the hashtag title #SilenceIsNotSpiritual went viral on social media. #SilenceIsNotSpiritual recognized the #MeToo movement as an indication of kairos time, or holy time, and called church leaders and communities to stand with all victims of violence, particularly calling out the realities of sexual abuse within the church. The initial 150 signatures endorsing the statement came from women with varying degrees of affiliation to right-wing US evangelical Protestantism. The signees ranged from pastors, to nonprofit founders, directors and CEOs, to authors, poets, speakers, and professors. One name which caught particular attention – in both mainline news sources, such as Time Magazine, and Christian news sources alike – was Beth Moore.¹

One of the reasons why Moore’s signature was noteworthy is her affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which has publicly maintained a complementarian understanding of the sexes – meaning men and women are believed to be naturally disposed to separate realms and roles, which are purported to be equal, yet consistently preclude women from positions of power, particularly in the church.² Moore had previously captured attention because of her initial alignment with the #MeToo movement through a tweet on October 15, 2017, where she said, “A well-meaning mentor told me at 25 that people couldn't handle hearing about sexual abuse and it would sink my ministry. It didn’t. #MeToo.” Her outspokenness on the sexual abuse, violence, and misogyny that had previously existed within her ministry grew from this tweet into a more public and critical forum. (For further reading on Beth Moore’s previous openness on childhood sexual abuse within the context of her teaching, see Bryan and Albakry (2015).) Her specific denunciation of these realities within the church became potent not only when she signed the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual statement in December 2017, but also in her own statement published on May 3, 2018 on her ministries’ blog under the title, A Letter to My Brothers. In this letter, Moore made a very significant declaration:

[In] early October 2016 [there] surfaced attitudes among some key Christian leaders that smacked of misogyny, objectification and astonishing disesteem of women and it spread like wildfire … I came face to face with one of the most demoralizing realizations of my adult life: Scripture was not the reason for the colossal disregard and disrespect of women among many of these men. It was only the excuse. Sin was the reason. Ungodliness. (Moore 2018a)

Since the #MeToo movement has been linked closely with feminism, this public statement begged the question as to whether a transformation was happening among conservative Christian women, who would otherwise not self-identify as feminists.
Was this public alignment of conservative Christian women like Beth Moore with the #MeToo movement an indication of non-feminists taking on feminist values and challenging structural inequalities about how various bodies matter?

The question was heightened when in May of 2018 a #MeToo scandal rocked the center of the Southern Baptist leadership, when misconduct allegations were brought against the ‘conservative resurgence’ leader Paige Patterson (Shellnutt 2018). In response, a group of Southern Baptist women wrote and distributed a petition entitled *Letter to SWBTS Board of Trustees*, calling for the removal of Patterson from his position, at the time, as President of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Southern Baptist women 2018). The petition begins by reasserting the signees’ adherence to the complementarian understanding of the sexes, as stated in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (SBC 2000); yet, the collective power harnessed by these women through the petition raised attention. For example, Mandy McMichael of Baylor University discussed these events in a January 2018 article, in which she argued that Baptist women’s history has always been complex and attention to the nuances of women’s perspectives ought to be featured. She concluded by saying, ‘it has also been my aim to point toward new avenues of exploration and to challenge historians to be more careful and inclusive in their scholarship ... doing so might mean that when the Patterson story is discussed in the future, it is referred to as something like the “Baptist women rising up” story instead of the Patterson downfall’ (McMichael 2018:78). McMichael, therefore, seemed to see this collective action as a marker of Baptist women’s resistance, a harnessing of their agency and power even within the context of complementarianism. Kathryn House also noted this unique aspect of the story in her symposium response to the same petition. Positioning herself as a former Southern Baptist, now ordained, woman in the American Baptist church, she shared that the letter instilled in her a ‘fragile hope’ in the courage of the women who signed this document. House even extended this hope to include the appreciation that she felt that the petition signees, and Beth Moore in her *Letter to my Brothers*, both refrained from ‘slut-shaming or blaming feminists or queer folks’ (House 2019:360–1). House also talked about a ‘fragile fear’ in response to this letter, noting the almost excessive reference to the Bible in the petition’s wording. She says of her fragile fear,

> I wonder if the centrality of the Bible to the letter is not a sign that the Bible will be more important than women’s well-being, that inerrancy will mask misogyny once again, and that the problematic nature of submission and domination will not receive the rendering so desperately needed in this moment. (House 2019:359–60)
The point of considering McMichael and House is not to label them as feminists, but rather to recognize their scholarly interests and investment in a narrative of agential resistance among Southern Baptist women. I share House’s fragile hope and fear. However, what particularly stood out in her article was the operating lens of her inquiry:

I want to explore what it means for these thousands of women to authorize themselves as Southern Baptists by assenting to the very theological frameworks they contest. On the one hand, I am not sure they could make their argument otherwise. They must qualify themselves as concerned constituents and not acolytes of western culture’s curriculum of clergywomen, gender fluidity, or egalitarian marriages. They might raise passionate concerns and dismay over Patterson’s words and actions, but they must issue a critique that will register in recognizable terms. (House 2019:359)

It is this harnessing of agential power to critique in a way that ‘will register in recognizable terms’ which leads me to this article’s intention. This study proposes that a theory of religious performativity which takes seriously the emphasized role of a transcendent agent for the religious person (thus building upon but distinct from Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity) will aid in understanding what is happening among American complementarian conservative Christians as they appear to join the cultural resistance of the #MeToo movement, demanding that female bodies matter. The primary aim, then, is to set out what is meant by a theory of religious performativity, and to show its usefulness in analyzing the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual movement, particularly as it has extended into Southern Baptist women’s circles. To show this, the study will first situate this theory of religious performativity with other religious studies’ use of performance theories. Then, to better outline the distinctiveness of this use of performance for studying religious persons, the article will review Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Next, the study identifies the unique challenges feminists face when studying conservative religious groups, and how application of the religious performativity theory can help to address them. Finally, a succinct outline of religious performativity will be applied to two recent letters published by women affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention – Beth Moore’s Letter to my Brothers and the petition Letter to the SWBTS Board of Trustees. This theory of religious performativity will better explain the nuances of conservative Christian women’s resistance in such a way that will respect their agency and note the helpful parallels to the #MeToo movement, while at the same time distinguishing the cause put forward by Southern Baptist women from the secular feminist #MeToo movement.
Situating a theory of religious performativity

The concept of performance analysis was first used in religious studies in the context of ritual studies, in order to criticize previous practices which analyzed ritual as acting out a script. The assumption of ritual as script meant ritual could be universalized. Catherine Bell critiqued this universalization, and instead focused performance analysis on individual agency and navigation of power within ritual. She noted that ‘performance analysis suggests that particular efficacy of [a subject’s] actions as action lies in how she creates and modifies such realities while never quite seeing the creation of the system as such’ (Bell 1998:216; emphasis added). It is Bell’s emphasis on studying not just ritual actions but seeing them as action, whether conscious or not, that is importantly linked with the way that Judith Butler, and subsequently this article, will also understand performativity to function. Butler’s theory of performativity – which dissects how agency functions within power frameworks – also elucidates the intricacies of Bell’s suggestion to focus on action.

In his book, Religion Out Loud, Isaac Weiner took performance analysis into the public sphere. His research studied religious sounds, such as church bells, the Muslim call to prayer, and megaphone proselytizing in public parks, through the lens of legal disputes (Weiner 2013). In this way, his work considered the navigation of power and agency in and through institutional forms. This article looks not only at individuals, such as Beth Moore, but also collectives of individuals, such as the women who signed the petition to remove Paige Patterson from his position, and also institutions such as the Southern Baptist Convention. Similar to Weiner, this study is concerned with the interplay of these agents in the public forum, in this case, on social media. The two letters can be considered as performatory texts operating within webs of power and agency. The production, content, and mode of exhibition of the letters can be analyzed, in order to consider how dynamics of power materialize the value of female bodies within the Southern Baptist church. As will be detailed below, the letters also demonstrate women’s citational agency to harness certain dynamics of power, in order to both shift and secure the matter of female bodies.

My theory of religious performativity builds upon the work of both Bell and Weiner, but distinctly engages Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, in order to focus less on agents and more on actions of agency. This shift of focus allows us to step back and see the way discourse materializes bodies. Agents are made in the in-between spaces. In the actions of response, reaction, and assertion bodies are made intelligible. In a movement concerned with female bodies, it is important to consider not just
agents, but how actions of agency materialize bodies and influence which bodies matter and how they matter. Furthermore, this article contends that religious study needs to apply close analysis to how the religious person experiences or perceives actions of agency as connected to transcendence, or God. Engaging with Butler allows us to consider how agency exercised in the name of individuals, institutions, and most especially God, can shape reality and subsequent actions of agency.

**Butler's theory of performativity**

Butler’s recurring definition of performativity is that, ‘performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler 1993:2). This short definition points out four aspects of performativity that are key to understanding Butler’s argument.

First, performativity is much larger than one person; it refers to a societal production in which we are all engaged, or perhaps a production which binds us. Specifically, in her book, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler wants to make clear that performativity is not about a singular subject choosing their gender each day.

Second, this binding of performativity happens by virtue of citations which coalesce through repetition, creating the laws by which we live – legally or not. The simplest way to explain citations is by thinking of a police officer issuing citations for transgressions. However, in performativity these citations are not just handed out by one person or set of people appointed to this task; they can be issued by each of us. Even more, just as consequences can be good or bad, these citations can be used to encourage reiteration of certain behaviors or to indicate inappropriate behavior. Since Butler was especially concerned with resistance against the hegemony, it makes sense that she would use a word like ‘citation,’ which makes us think of negative consequences for transgressions. I think this word is very important, but to emphasize the ways in which ‘citation’ is also used positively to denote approval, I will be using the word ‘approbation’ to refer specifically to citational moments of praise and acceptance.

Third, Butler’s definition reminds us that performance is deeply connected with the materiality of life. Our bodies are not static or passive, but actively contribute to how we understand ourselves, how others interpret us, and how we understand and interpret other bodies. This emphasis on materiality is evident in the statement, ‘discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler 1993:2). Butler disrupted assumptions of the static nature of ‘sex’ upon which gender is assigned, and instead insisted that the
materiality of ‘sex’ is directly linked with the production of gender. To do this, she claims in her theory that ‘materiality will be rethought as the effect of power’ (Butler 1993:2). This power to materialize bodies as intelligible is centralized in what Butler might call a discursive hegemony, the power that results from coalescing citations or approbations within a matrix of agents engaged in discourse. It is worth pointing out that Butler’s use of ‘discourse’ comprises more than mere dialogue and conversation. Discourse is meant to encompass societal language, social cues, hegemonic etiquette, etc.

The important role of this discursive discourse is perhaps the most important aspect of Butler’s definition of gender performativity as it pertains to transitioning into a theory of religious performativity. Remember that Butler shifted to talking about gender performativity in direct response to questions of agency which arise with language of gender construction. In Bodies that Matter, she argues that the language of gender construction implies that some or some thing must be doing the constructing. In contrast, her definition of performance emphasizes that it is not some one but rather a subversive power found in discourse that compels performance.

In other words, while Butler’s theory of performativity may not be based on a single agent, it is perpetuated through actions of agency, where each person has agency in each moment to either act in line with the discursive laws of performance and enjoy approbation, or to push against the discursive laws and risk citation.

**Considering agency**

It is crucial to consider this specific way that Butler conceptualizes agency within her theory of performativity. Butler seems to acknowledge real agency by individuals, yet that agency always exists within a web of agential influences which may limit the options seemingly available. This powerful limitation of what is intelligible or seemingly possible could be construed as the hegemonic discourse. Much feminist scholarship is concerned with paying attention to moments of agency that challenge such a discourse. In the case of gender, for Butler in particular, she seeks to offer a theory which challenges the gender binary imposed by such a hegemonic. Similar to Catherine Bell, the actions of agency function even outside the realm of cognizance; yet, more specifically to Butler, the cognitive reality of what is possible or what is not is materially linked to discourse production.

What does this mean in relation to the #MeToo movement and the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual movement? It means that these resistance movements could signify a shifting in the discourse, which might also shift what is materially possible and intelligible; in these cases, the ways in
which female bodies matter. However, such a claim must be put forth with caution. The feminist religious studies scholar walks a precarious road in offering explanations for resistance movements among conservative religious women – especially those who would not label themselves as feminist. On the one hand, as anthropologist Saba Mahmood warned, the feminist scholar runs the risk of unduly applying a ‘nascent feminist consciousness’ to her conservative female subjects. Mahmood’s cautions stem from her ethnographic examination of Muslim women’s piety movements in Egypt (Mahmood 2005). A definition of feminist thinking can help us to understand more clearly how the study of conservative religious groups challenge feminist scholarship and thinking. In their volume, *Feminist Ethnography*, editors Dana-Ain Davis and Christa Craven define feminist thinking as that which is ‘organized around supporting the struggles of people whose lives are marked and marred by structural inequalities’ (Davis and Craven 2016:8). Therefore, the challenge to feminist thinking presents itself when women subjects appear to be marked and marred by structural inequalities, yet they are engaged in movements which appear to reinforce those same inequalities. In the case of the Muslim women’s piety movement, Mahmood notes, ‘the very idioms that women use to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres are also those that secure their subordination’ (Mahmood 2015:47; emphasis added). Or, as Kathryn House suggested in her fragile fear about the petition letter from the Southern Baptist women, ‘that inerrancy will mask misogyny once again.’ There may be an element of resistance from Beth Moore and those who signed the petition to the SWBTS board of trustees, but it is not resistance bent on ameliorating structural inequalities of complementarianism. In other words, resistance does not necessarily mean feminism. To make such a leap would be to assume too strict a dichotomy between resistance and subordination. It also reduces agency to actions of resistance alone, such that a lack of resistance is labeled as a lack of agency.

Which brings us to another risk for feminists engaged in research of non-feminist subjects: a Marxist reduction of religion to a tool of oppression which flattens the agency of the conservative religious woman and further denies her status as a subject. Marie Griffith, a historian of American religion, has emphasized that feminist scholarship needs to listen closely and empathetically to non-feminists. Her observation that ‘historical treatments of women’s piety have tended to present a flattened version of modern religious non-feminists’ (Griffith 1997:5) motivated her ethnographic study of a conservative evangelical women’s organization, Women’s Aglow International. Within Aglow, Griffith discovered that while women could maneuver the church doctrine of submission with more flexibility
than initially supposed, there still remained ‘idioms of control lurking within’ (Griffith 1997:202), especially as control was related to spiritual disciplines. And, yet, Griffith continued, ‘Evangelical women accept and even celebrate these disciplines ... because such disciplines and the boundaries they engender make them feel like true women’ (Griffith 1997:202). There is agency in submission.

Similarly, Mahmood’s study on Muslim women in Egypt was particularly concerned with how a Western gaze further influenced a feminist tendency to too hastily reduce agency to resistance. She acknowledges that Butler defines agency as possible by each person in each moment, regardless of whether they act in defiance of the hegemony or in line with it. However, Mahmood points out that Butler’s work often focuses discussion of agency as rooted in challenges to the normative. This is especially because of Butler’s concern with those bodies which the hegemony seeks to erase or ignore. This is a worthy cause, but Mahmood worries that, left alone, this application of agency misses the unique dynamic of agency engaged in perpetuations of the normative.

Thus, Mahmood’s concern is applicable to consideration of complementarian Christian women’s engagement with the #MeToo movement in the United States. Is agency among these women reduced to moments of resistance? What of the ways in which they resist while also perpetuating theological claims concerning complementarian gender? In what follows, we will consider how a theory of religious performativity which leans on Butler’s theory of gender performativity can help to elucidate the complexity within the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual movement.

A theory of religious performativity

The purpose of a philosophical exposition of gender performativity such as Butler’s is to explain our existence and how we come to understand our identities. Nonetheless, most of us do not operate daily thinking about how we are responding to discursive laws of intelligibility. We simply swim in the waters, taking for granted our individualism and autonomous subjecthood.

Even so, we may have our own explanations for why we are who we are. For example, a Christian complementarian understanding of gender grounds its expected normative behaviors in the authority of God. Therefore, for the conservative religious subject, God is understood as the authoritarian agent from whom gender order originates. In this view, there is male and female. Man has been placed above woman, just as Christ is above the man and Father God is above Christ. God’s clarity on this issue,
for the conservative religious person, comes from scriptural texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:2–3.

Because of this staunch belief system, it is important to recognize that an SBC woman with a complementarian worldview may resist the application of a religious performativity theory. Nonetheless, for a religious studies scholar positioned outside the complementarian worldview, this theory will prove helpful toward the goal of understanding what is happening within that worldview. This theory seeks to respect the worldview of the religious person with the claim that we can hold the belief system of the religious person intact, even as we seek to dissect what is happening.

For example, a theory of religious performativity takes the agency of God seriously and seeks to consider how, for the religious subject, God may be engaged in citational practice influencing both gender and religious performance. This citational practice could be experienced directly from the transcendent agent or indirectly. By indirectly, I mean all the citations or approbations from earthly agents that appeal to God as authoritarian agent to give greater credence to citations.

Unlike the religious person or a theologian, the religious studies scholar is not concerned with whether or not there is an actual agent, God. Because of this, we could say direct citations from God are not actually accessible. A theory of religious performance is concerned only with ‘indirect’ citation – the mediums through which the religious person perceives and reports God’s citations. The focus is on the patterns of citationality as they particularly pertain to God. Thus, in religious performance, as in gender performance, each person does have agency in the ways in which bodies are materialized and given value. The theory does dispute the normative claim of complementarians that God is the authoritarian agent. It still claims that the materialization of gendered and religious bodies comes about through a discursive matrix of agency.

Nonetheless, in religious performance, the scholar accepts that for the religious person the transcendent agent’s involvement within the matrix of agency is more heavily weighted. Citations (including approbations) attributed to God are of utmost importance in the formation of intelligible identity, but they are never delivered in a vacuum. Religious performativity understands that the agency of a transcendent agent is always within a discourse. Butler is concerned with questioning the assumption that there is ever a pure body (sex) which societal discourse makes intelligible (gender), but rather that ‘there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body’ (Butler 1993:10). As this relates to religious performativity, if God is said to have created gender in such a ‘pure’ way, this appeal in itself is a further formation of bodies. There is
no reference to God’s understanding of body that is not at the same time a further formation of that body. Talk of God further forms the body, even more so if belief means that the agency of God is given greater authority within a cacophony of discourse. The formation of the body, as such, still results not simply from God, but also from the one who gives approbation to the authority of God and thereby exerts their own agency.

The emphasized attention to the direct (as perceived by the religious subject) and indirect citational impact of a transcendent agent brings us back to the intimate way in which Butler’s theory of gender performance is tied to mechanisms of power. Anthropologist of religion Lila Abu-Lughod has suggested that a particularly informative way to analyze mechanisms of power is to study social movements of resistance (Abu-Lughod 2015:40). She is careful to point out that a simplistic celebration of resistance as evidence for the dismantling of power structures often misses the complex nature of power to shift. Thus, studying resistance becomes helpful in analyzing how power structures are not necessarily disappearing, but rather how they may be shifting. So, heeding the warnings raised by Saba Mahmood, we can use resistance not as an indicator of agency but as an indicator of power shifts.

The remainder of this article seeks to apply this theory of religious performativity to two recent documents, in order to acknowledge the agency of Southern Baptist women and consider what their current resistance might mean in terms of shifting power. The first is the blogpost by Beth Moore, entitled Letter to My Brothers, published on her ministry’s webpage on May 3, 2018. The second is the petition entitled Letter to SWBTS Board of Trustees, made public on May 6, 2018 and signed by over 3000 Southern Baptist women.

**Intersections of gender and religious performativity**

Beth Moore is a self-taught women’s Bible study leader. Her ministry took off in 1994 when she founded Living Proof Ministries (LPM) in Houston, Texas, in order to teach ‘women how to love and live on God’s Word.’ Her popularity has grown across different denominations, and her dynamic bible studies are broadcast to church groups all over the world. To apply religious performativity language, Moore’s success can be attributed to procuring more approbation than citation for her gender and religious performativity, despite encountering plenty of critics who have sought to censure her simply for being a female Bible study teacher. Political, cultural, and denominational events that transpired from 2016 to 2018 seemed to arouse in Moore a greater cognizance of the performativity she has been
subject to, and especially how a conservative Christian climate has enabled a certain male subculture to not value her or her sisters as bodies or subjects. For example, in her open *Letter to My Brothers* posted in May 2018 she admits that, ‘As a woman leader in the conservative Evangelical world, I learned early to show constant pronounced deference – not just proper respect which I was glad to show – to male leaders and, when placed in situations to serve alongside them, to do so apologetically.’ (Moore 2018a).

One of the aspects of performativity, as outlined by Butler, is the creation of constraints through which the hegemonic is perpetuated. Thus, when Moore says she ‘learned early’ we can see an example of performativity constraints at work. She learned how to present herself, behave, and speak as a female leader based on prior citations, whether positive or negative.

As Moore’s letter goes on, however, we see a frustration with the gender performativity that she has encountered, precisely because of how it materialized her body as object rather than as valuable subject. She recounts how she had been ignored by fellow male leaders. At the least, she was never acknowledged, even when in the same elevator, vehicle, or meeting. At worst, she was the object of jokes which dismissed and ridiculed her to her face.

The point at which this letter shows the intersection of gender and religious performativity comes when Moore talks about why she has conformed to the gender performativity constraints: ‘I accepted the peculiarities accompanying female leadership in a conservative Christian world because I chose to believe that, whether or not some of the actions and attitudes seemed godly to me, they were rooted in deep convictions based on passages from 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14.’ (Moore 2018a).

The text in 1 Timothy 2 admonishes women to dress modestly, learn in silence with full submission, and to not teach or have authority over men. The text 1 Corinthians 14 is a reiteration of the command for women to be silent in church. Within a denomination that is very clear in its belief that all of scripture is the inspired and inerrant Word of God (SBC 2000), these passages operate as direct citations from a transcendent agent, namely God, for the religious person. As such, the approbational rewards are plenty in religious performance; there is salvation and righteousness in the eyes of God and one’s faith community. The punishment of citations is also severe, because a deviation from these roles might threaten one’s salvation. As Moore stated, ‘she chose to believe’ that her brothers were acting with conviction regarding these scriptural passages. Thus, in this exertion of agency she excuses males’ behavior because of an understanding of the agency of God, and she follows a particular gender performativity model for herself – deference, endurance, apology – based on the
same understanding of the agency of God. As Mahmood encouraged, this deference is not a flattening of Moore’s agency, but rather an enactment of agency to perpetuate the normative. The motivation to participate in that perpetuation comes from an interaction and understanding of a particular agent, the transcendent agent.

This interaction is, again, for Moore and company, primarily accessed through their understanding of scripture as inerrant. Even if there is room to consider the author of Timothy as the inspired witness to God’s Word, these passages can still be understood as indirect citations from God. Indeed, the degree to which the religious person believes scripture to be witness to direct or indirect citations from God impacts the perceived severity of passages such as these. While Moore seems to accept scriptures as impacting performativity constraints directly, she also names and critiques manipulations of indirect agency from God in the significant declaration mentioned at the outset of this article. Let’s return to it again:

[In] early October 2016 [there] surfaced attitudes among some key Christian leaders that smacked of misogyny, objectification and astonishing disesteem of women and it spread like wildfire … I came face to face with one of the most demoralizing realizations of my adult life: Scripture was not the reason for the colossal disregard and disrespect of women among many of these men. It was only the excuse. Sin was the reason. Ungodliness. (Moore 2018a)

In arguing that scripture was not the reason for disrespect of women but rather an excuse, Moore also contributes to the indirect citational appeal to God by continuing in her letter by calling out her brothers for giving an inappropriate amount of authority to certain verses and failing to point out that other passages show women as followers of Christ, that a woman was the first evangelist, and that the Apostle Paul served with and held in high esteem numerous women. She appeals to her brothers, saying, ‘We are fully capable of grappling with the tension the two spectrums create and we must if we’re truly devoted to the whole counsel of God’s Word.’ (Moore 2018a).

Here, Moore has certainly exerted her agency in a way which appears, particularly to hopeful feminists, as resistance. And it is a resistance. Nonetheless, even as she pushes back against the behavior of some men within her denomination and reprimands their use of scripture (thereby denying their indirect citations from God), the authority by which she does so is through her own indirect appeal to the agency of God. Thus, it is not that Moore and other Southern Baptist women are seeking to dismantle the gender power structure based on complementarianism. They still uphold gender complementarianism, since they believe that this type of order is
ordained via direct citation from God. Nonetheless, the resistance evident in Moore’s letter and the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual movement, which involves even more Southern Baptist women, may point to a shifting of power. These women are activating their own ability to administer citations, calling men into the right order within complementarianism. The discursive shift in power is that these women are harnessing the weight of God’s agency to their own to give greater credence to their citations as not theirs alone, but as indirect citations from God.

Could it be that this discursive shift is not only the reason that gave Beth Moore the courage to publish her open letter, but then a mere three days later emboldened women across the SBC denomination to sign a petition to remove Paige Patterson from his position as President of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary? The petition for his removal was based on (1) video evidence of his objectification of a young girl in a sermon, in which he also suggested ‘this as behavior that is biblical’ (SB women 2018); (2) reports that he had given battered women advice to stay in their marriages in roles of submission, simply praying to God to intervene (SB women 2018); and finally, (3) that he had shown no repentance or explanation for his inappropriate comments and unbiblical teaching.

In the 1980s, Paige Patterson was instrumental in organizing a manipulation of the Southern Baptist Convention’s governance to purge the denomination of liberalism. He and his compatriots did this by campaigning within congregations for the election of a conservative president of the SBC, and then padding the convention attendees with conservative congregants by busing them in on the day of the vote (Ammerman 2990:192). Once a conservative president was elected, they had the power to remove and appoint leaders to oversee missions, educational materials, and seminary presidents and faculty. Theological positions on the roles of women were used as a litmus test to determine a person’s loyalty to the conservative cause, and particularly their dedication to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God (Ammerman 2990:94). For example, Patterson was known, among others, for arguing that the Bible supports clear hierarchies of husband over wife and pastor over laity (Ammerman 2990:87). Because this particular view aided Patterson’s rise to power, it is especially ironic that an opposition to its application was instrumental in his removal from power.

The petition signed by the Southern Baptist women and addressed to the seminary’s board of trustees calls Patterson out for an unbiblical view of authority. The petition begins by clearly identifying the signees as women who affirm the denomination’s most recent statements ‘on the roles of men and women in the family and church’ (SB women 2018), as
referenced earlier in the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 statement. Yet, even after affirming complementarian roles, they urge the board of trustees to ‘take a strong stand against unbiblical teaching regarding womanhood, sexuality, and domestic violence’ (SB women 2018). The women ground their agential call for action in the more powerful call from God to ‘protect the helpless, the call of Christ to love our neighbor as ourselves, and the biblical standard of sexual purity’ (SB women 2018). Thus, here again, the power shift we see is the women bolstering their own agency through an indirect appeal to the agency of God.

The letter continues with an admonition to be careful of worldly citations. The women write, ‘The world is watching us all, brothers. They wonder how we could possibly be part of a denomination that counts Dr. Patterson as a leader.’ (SB women 2018). Lest we think this letter is motivated by performativity constraints from those outside the church, the letter continues by grounding concern for the world as rooted in deference to the transcendent agent: ‘We declare that Jesus is nothing like this and that our first duty as Southern Baptists is to present a true picture of Jesus to the world.’ (SB women 2018). Therefore, the statement itself is a clear example of women resisting by issuing a severe citation for misrepresentation of the agency of God.

It appears that this document made an impression on the board. Patterson was removed from any position within the Southern Baptist Convention which might allow him to represent a faulty picture of God to the world under the auspices of authority to do so.

Conclusion

These two documents – Beth Moore’s Letter to My Brothers and the Southern Baptist women’s petition, Letter to SWBTS Board of Trustees – viewed through the lens of religious performativity can help us to see how their citational nature may point to a resistance, but not against the structures of normativity upheld by the doctrine of complementarianism. The agency of Beth Moore and a constituent of her Southern Baptist sisters lies in reclaiming the structures of complementarian normativity, even as they demand that within those structures female bodies ought to be treated with more respect. Therefore, while it is important to note that the #SilencesIsNotSpiritual movement and #MeToo movement have the shared goal of valuing the female body, there remain distinct differences in motives and gender performativity expectations. Revealing this distinction is not meant to create a depressing picture of continual polarization between feminist and non-feminist populations, but rather to emphasize that good feminist
Marie Olson Purcell scholarship needs to stay committed to honoring women’s agency, even if those women disagree with a feminist worldview.

Strengthened by God’s approbations for them, these women identified the actions, leadership, and statements of some of their brothers as ungodly, devoid of agency from God either directly or indirectly. In order to bolster the impact of their citations, these women are both identifying how the indirect agency of God can be at risk of misinterpretation and even manipulation, while also channeling their own ability to embody the indirect agency of God. These women are not appealing to cultural gender performativity shifts to demand that their bodies matter; they are arguing that their bodies matter to God.

**Addendum**

As of March 2021, Beth Moore publicly announced her departure from the SBC and LifeWay Publishing. Her disillusionment with SBC leadership in the face of sexual abuse scandals and denials of critical race theory were the groundwork of her departure, buttressed by the citational power of God through her scriptural study of Galatians 2:14. This passage resonated with her experience of SBC leaders conduct. She said, “It was not in step with the gospel.” (Smietana 2021) Her citation of the church for continuing to inflict harm on bodies that matter to God was to remove her body from the institution; literally performing a bodily citation.

**About the author**

Marie Olson Purcell is a PhD Candidate in Religion and Culture at Southern Methodist University. As a scholar of American religions, particularly Christianity, gender and dialogical engagement across disparate worldviews, her primary methodology is anthropological with a theological reflexivity informed by feminisms and relational dynamics. Her dissertation is an ethnography of evangelical women looking at intersections between religious identity, gender identity and political identity formation.

**Notes**

1. For example, the Christian Post, a pan-denominational Christian news source with strong ties to both evangelicalism in the United States and globally, headlined their article on the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual statement using Beth Moore’s name on the day after the statement went public (Zaimov 2017).
2. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention supports this precise belief in equal value yet distinct callings and roles as articulated in their adopted Baptist Faith and Message (SBC 2000): “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”
Conservative resurgence is both common usage and Patterson's own language to describe the shifting of powers within the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s (Patterson 2012).

There has been a rich swath of scholarship on the helpfulness of studying social movements of resistance as a way to detect societal transformation. In Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnographic study of Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin women, she suggests that we can use ‘resistance as a diagnostic of power,' which also helps to ‘detect historical shifts in configurations or methods of power' (Abu-Lughod 2015:40). Leith Mullings has also done extensive research on social movements following Abu-Lughod's suggestion. Mullings has demonstrated that social movements which ‘challenge traditional knowledge paradigms’ may lead to opportunities for ‘alternative knowledge production’ (Mullings 2015).

'To the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms, this makes these formations vulnerable because each restatement/reenactment can fail.' (Mahmood 2005:19).

The suspicion that a Southern Baptist woman would resist application of a theory informed by feminist philosophies is based on the 2019 statement released by the SBC, which resolved that secular philosophies such as critical race theory and intersectionality ‘should only be employed as analytical tools subordinate to Scripture.’ It also resolved to deny ‘any philosophy or theology that fundamentally defines individuals using categories identified as sinful in Scripture rather than the transcendent reality shared by every image bearer and divinely affirmed distinctions.’ However, even this statement, and the performance of its application, could itself be analyzed using a theory of religious performativity (SBC 2019).

Interestingly, her ministry’s vision statement now is directed at all people, not simply at women: ‘Living Proof Ministries is dedicated to encourage people to come to know and love Jesus Christ through the study of Scripture.’ (Moore 2018b).

‘The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.’

This book is an excellent ethnographic and sociological study of the conservative takeover of the denomination back in the 1980s.

References


