

Exploring the Religious and Feminist Values of Canadian Women¹

by

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Since the 1960s, feminism can be identified for the profound impact that it has had on Canadian society and on women in particular. That many more women are found in the labour force, that many women support women's equality in the private and public spheres, and that many women have pushed down barriers in an effort to achieve that equality is clear. Less easily identified but equally profound for many women has been the change in the role played by religion. The overall decline in participation, the push to increase women's participation in clergy and lay positions, and profoundly disturbing and unsettling scandals have undoubtedly shaken the foundations upon which women's religious faith is built.

This paper seeks to examine how Canadian women interpret each of these forces within their lives and is a first step in a larger project that hopes to examine how feminism and religious values shape women's political attitudes. Research on the role that values play in shaping public opinion remains remarkably underdeveloped (Jacoby, 2002). The limited research that has focussed specifically on the political opinions of women has often occurred within the framework of research on gender gaps in attitudes and voting behaviour (Erickson and O'Neill 2002; Gidengil 1995; Gidengil et al. 2003; Howell and Day 2000). While such work has been important for highlighting how women and men differ in various ways that are relevant for the determination of their opinion, the approach taken in this paper focuses singularly on women in an attempt to focus on the two forces that can be argued to be particularly important to the shaping of their opinions in recent generations.

Why study only women? Because there is an important reason for believing that women's private lives are significantly different from men's and sufficient reason for concluding that their might be a unique set of explanations for their political behaviour, including their political opinions (O'Neill, 2002). Research on the gender gap in public opinion has highlighted differences in a number of women and men's values. And although an argument has been made that changes in gender gaps in voting may be due more to men's realignment than women's, there remain important reasons for investigating the full set of sources for women's political opinions (Gidengil 2003).

The ultimate goal of this research project is to understand the particular forces that play a part in shaping women political opinions. There are conceivably a large number of factors that might be examined for their importance in shaping opinion: socio-demographic variables such as age, income, education and region are some of those that come immediately to mind. Women's greater compassion and caring has been identified as a possible source of their more liberal outlook (Gilligan 1982) as have situational factors such as greater responsibility for childcare, lower incomes and occupational status (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

The focus on values in this research project stems from research that suggests their importance in explaining differences in women's and men's political opinions. Changes in values across generations of Canadians have been identified and argued to play a role in shaping political behaviour more broadly (Nevitte 1996). Values are standards that guide political opinion and behaviour and their sources are multiple. The approach adopted here assumes that many women struggle with shifting traditional and modern forces in their lives. Feminist values have been shown to play a role in the determination of women's opinions and behaviour given the resultant shift in priorities accompanying the adoption of gender as a basis for judging

opinion and action (Conover 1988; Hayes et al. 2000; O'Neill 1996, 2001). The values associated with feminism have also been identified for their role in transforming conservative gender gaps to liberal ones on a number of issues as young women have come of age benefiting from changes brought on by feminist activism (Everitt 1998a; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Changes within feminist thought and activism are reflected in the differing feminist attitudes across generations of Canadian women (O'Neill 2003). There is also an understanding that feminist identity and feminist opinions are separate yet related constructs (Rhodebeck 1996). Women need not identify with feminists in order to reveal opinions in line with the movement. The "I'm not a feminist but .." phenomenon among the most recent generations of women falls in line with this trend; young women have adopted the beliefs and values of the feminist movement but are unwilling to identify as such (O'Neill, 2003; Peltola, Milkie and Presser, 2004).

Religiosity is also an important source of values for women given Western religions' interpretations of women's private roles as wife and mother, and more publicly, as protector of society's morality. Religion also remains fundamental to understanding women's political behaviour (Caiazza 2005; Inglehart and Norris 2003; O'Neill 2006). Conservative gender gaps in opinion have historically been linked to the strength of women's religious beliefs although increased secularization has mediated their relevance somewhat. Nonetheless, their role in shaping attitudes remains (O'Neill, 2001). Interestingly, however, at the aggregate level women remain at the same time more religious and more feminist than men (O'Neill, 1996 and 2001).

This first stage in a larger research project explores Canadian women's understanding and interpretation of feminism and religion within their everyday lives. Much of the literature on women's political behaviour relies on surveys to come to conclusions regarding women's feminist, and to a lesser extent, religious beliefs. A decidedly different approach is adopted here: women in focus groups across the country have been asked to reflect on how they interpret and define each of religion and feminism, and to reflect on how each matters in their everyday lives. This information will be employed to move on to the second stage in the research project, a national survey of women on their values, political opinions and behaviour.

Methodology

The data on which this exploration is based were collected in nine focus groups that were conducted with Canadian women between July 14th and 22nd in the summer of 2004.² These focus groups took place in several Canadian cities (Vancouver, Calgary, Lethbridge, Winnipeg, Toronto (2), Montreal, Fredericton, and Halifax) selected to allow for significant variation in region and city size, two factors that are likely to affect women's feminist and religious values. Additionally, women were selected so as to allow for variation in the composition of the groups in terms of the strength of religious and feminist beliefs. Two of the groups were composed of women with moderate to strong religious beliefs (Fredericton and Toronto 2), one was composed of women with moderate to strong feminist views (Vancouver) and the remaining groups were composed of women with a mixture of feminist and religious beliefs. The focus groups ranged in size from 8 to 10 women and lasted between one and a half and two hours. Each of the focus groups was video and audio taped; transcriptions of the tapes form the basis of the analysis herein.³

Focus groups have only recently been introduced as a technique of use among political scientists. The technique was chosen in this instance because it was felt that allowing women to express in their own words first, how they interpreted and defined religion and feminism in their own lives, and second, the role that each played in their lives was particularly important. Second, allowing women to interact with each other as they addressed these questions was also important for understanding how women respond to each other on these issues. Much of the research on women's political opinions draws on national surveys to identify the relationship between various situational and structural factors and political attitudes. While important for the development of generalizable results, the method necessarily restricts the instruments employed to operationalize concepts to a handful of variables. Religiosity, for example, is often measured by one question tapping one's belief in God, and another assessing frequency of religious attendance. While fundamental to the concept, they provide fairly limited purchase in understanding in a comprehensive manner how religion is interpreted at an individual level.

The moderator's guide employed to guide discussion in the focus groups was structured so as to accomplish two specific goals: first, to allow the participants to *define* religion and feminism; and second, to allow them to describe how each was *practiced* on a daily basis. The moderator's guide that directed the focus group discussion is found in the Appendix. Not every question was asked in each group; the moderator took into account the discussion that had already taken place within the group when deciding which questions should be asked.

Focus Group Discussion

Religion

A number of themes can be identified in the discussions of religion within the focus groups. Four of the most dominant themes relate to:

- Religion as it is practiced both privately and as part of a community;
- Religion as belief versus religion as action;
- The personal and collective benefits of religion; and
- Religion versus spirituality.

In each of these themes two distinct levels can be identified: the individual and the community/group level. In each of the groups, the definition and role of religion was identified as it related to the person individually, either in their participation in or benefit from participation, and the community or group. In every instance, the positive spin on the themes are pulled from the discussion; where they appeared, negative elements are also reported.

The first theme that can be identified in the group discussion relates to the practice of religion. A number of the respondents identified the many ways in which religion is practiced at an individual level as key to its definition; religion is, in many ways, the *practice of faith*. For several, religion is a relationship, personally with God and/or with the faith community. As personal practice, a number of the women identify prayer as a key component of this relationship, whether on a daily or less regular basis. This prayer can be for personal assistance

and guidance, or directed towards aid or assistance for other members of the faith community. The importance of the personal relationship with God was underlined by a number of women; for them, faith ought not to be restricted by the dictates of any one religious faith. Instead, their personal search for a religious worldview meant experiencing and learning about various faiths in order to determine which messages provided the most meaning for them.

I do have a religious affiliation, but I prefer to worship in my own way outside of the church mainly because I like to explore religions. But at the same time I have a deep abiding faith and strong beliefs. But I still prefer to sit outside, meditate, read the Bible. I do attend a lot of different churches other than just the one I attend now. (Lethbridge)

The importance attached to attending organized religious services varied quite a bit across the women in the groups. For some, membership in a faith community requires more than individual prayer and devoting but instead a commitment to a community. For others, however, worship at service as less than, and even un-necessary for the practice of faith.

It's not just going to church. I go to church every Sunday but that is nil. It is the praying and what you do for other people. (Fredericton)

[Religion] is how you live your life, your actions, how you treat others; it is everyday. (Fredericton)

A number of women noted that a key element of their faith had to do with trying to live one's life according to a set of rules or prescriptions of their faith that were in various ways described quite simply as 'good.' For a number of the participants, this meant living according to "the golden rule," which means treating others as we ourselves wish to be treated. This universal moral code that hopes to impart fairness in our relationships with each other appeared to be endorsed by women of various faiths and of various ages.

We should respect one another. I try not to go around pushing my belief on other people. I believe that the most important thing is to love one another and share God's love. (Lethbridge)

As I get older I return back to biblical values to guide myself and my own life. I think those are good values and I think later I would like to raise my kids on those values. (Montreal).

I am a practicing Buddhist. To me it is very simple and the same basic tenets are found in all religions which is be kind, and make compassion the one speaking truth in our life. Do unto others that which you would want done unto yourself. (Toronto 1)

This distinction between the religious beliefs and religious action was a second thread that ran through the focus group discussions. The identification of religion as a set of morals to guide one's actions and as a belief system was repeated in a number of the groups. For some this

set of principles was a positive element—a compass by which to assess alternative courses of action.

I would say [religions] hold all the same values fundamentally; for instance, forgiveness, mutual help, helping one's fellow man, the idea of believing in something greater than oneself. (Montreal)

[Religion] has a lot to do with conditioning someone's way of acting and being. Sometimes it can help us raise our own awareness, to be more aware of our actions and their consequences. You know, to do more good. (Montreal)

Themes of selflessness, aid to others, humility, love, forgiveness, morality, discipline and patience permeate the conversations.

I've been learning more about humility, selflessness, letting go of pride, relying on God rather than relying on myself. (Calgary)

For others, however, religious organizations and religious values merely constrain action unnecessarily or are associated with hypocrisy.

Negatively speaking I think in every religion there is an element of control. There are some elements in a religion that dictate how people should behave. For instance, Christian religions, they tried to control women years ago so they would stay home and have as many kids as possible. So women felt controlled. (Montreal)

But certain groups of persons with some power try to use religion to control groups of people and this has happened in every society. (Montreal)

An understanding of religion as a belief system was often combined, although in some instances contrasted, with its depiction as action. Faith, then, is not simply a roadmap that provides direction for living one's life; instead, it also embodies action that on a daily basis helps to bring those beliefs to action.

It goes beyond spirituality. With spirituality I could do this in the quiet of my home but with religion it calls me to do active things like attend services, help someone who needs food. My religion calls me to take action. (Fredericton)

A number of women identified volunteering activities as key elements of their religious lives including volunteering for soup kitchens, sponsoring families from abroad, catechism classes, visitation of the sick and elderly, and collecting clothing for the needy.

There is catechism for the young kids at the church. We do kitchen workshops for married couples. I believe I could be a good person by helping them out that way. There is a lot to learn. (Fredericton)

The importance of “doing unto others” was linked to a norm of reciprocity: by caring for others in the community one could expect that the community would return that care if and when necessary. Importantly, some women identified the importance of action for faith but found that their busy lives left them quite simply too little time for volunteering, and in some cases, for attending services on a regular basis. For many of these women, work and responsibility for children left them with little time for anything else.

The third theme that permeated the focus group discussion on religion relates to the personal and collective benefits that proceed from it. On an individual level, religious faith provides women with a set of tools for coping with daily life and the various challenges that it delivers. Women described their religious faith as an anchor, as a source of strength and confidence, and as an instrument of peace, comfort and understanding.

[Religion to me means] peace and relationship. A place we can go and ask God for forgiveness if something happens or a loved one has passed away. Support. (Fredericton).

My parents are very religious so it had an impact on my childhood. So it's for me a sort of home base. If I have problems or if I am living through some difficult emotions or something, it gives me a sense of direction, a sense of bearings but I am not a practicing religious person. (Montreal)

I say my prayers every night. The communication with a higher power helps me understand things. (Toronto 1)

[Religion] gives us an anchor, something to hold onto. Something that is constant in a world that is always changing. (Toronto 1)

Going to church gives me a strength from God that I don't get from anywhere else. (Winnipeg)

A number of women identified the key role that their faith played in helping them through particularly tough times in their lives.

[Religion is] something to hold onto. It helps give you bearing. And when things are dark and difficult, holding on to those religious values helps you overcome the difficulties. (Montreal)

Because of my faith, it has helped me through some terrible times I have gone through, gave me strength, confidence, emotional and spiritual comfort. (Toronto 2)

Some noted that religion provides a mechanism for seeking answers to the “big questions.” One woman noted that discussions of spirituality are frowned upon in modern society and that her faith community provides her with an arena in which such spiritual questioning can take place openly.

The benefits that women identify are not limited to personal ones; at a community and collective level, women listed a number of positive elements that stem from the community aspect of religious faith. In the first instance, a number of women identified the importance of feeling that one is a member of a community. The sense of belonging that derives from one's membership in a faith community is a key benefit of religious involvement.

I think one of the best parts of having an organized religion is that sense of community we share with the people we worship with. You know at least that the small majority of people know your name and accept you because you have a similar belief system. (Calgary)

[Religion] is a feeling of belonging, belonging to a group, a community. (Montreal)

The importance of caring within that community is central in this discussion; the faith community is the instrument that provides opportunities for helping others, through both prayers and action, and a community whose efforts provide support and strength when directed at the individual. Others noted the importance of the social gatherings that are organized by religious communities; particularly within small communities, these opportunities for meeting others, for getting together as families, and for connecting with friends are important.

The social aspect of [religion plays a role in my life]; to see those you don't normally see. I love being able to see those that I haven't seen in a while. (Halifax)

Coming from a small town makes a difference; the church is very social and there are not many other social opportunities. (Halifax)

The churches have a fabulous social gathering where you could take your family there. It's not that expensive to go to. (Lethbridge)

One woman identified participation in the faith community as important for keeping individuals accountable for their behaviour. Whether this is to be characterized as a benefit is debatable, but the importance of knowing that one's behaviour is being evaluated by one's peer group likely leads one to check one's actions more than one might otherwise.

An interesting theme that ran through several of the group discussions relates less to the definition and practice of religion than to reaction to the use of the term "religion." For a number of the participants in the focus groups, "religious" was not an identifier that they were willing to employ to describe themselves even when they exhibited characteristics that one would normally associate with the term. That is, a number of the women who attended religious services, prayed and believed in a "God" were unwillingness to label themselves religious. This unwillingness seems to stem from an association of religion with *organized religion as an institution*. That is, a number of the women who were unwillingness to call themselves 'religious' were instead quite happy to adopt the label 'spiritual' in part, it appears, because the latter is a more personal

identity while the former is linked to institutions and organizations that are not always seen in a positive light, as noted above. According to the participants,

I hate the word religion; spiritual is a better word. I do attend religious services at a non-denominational [church] a few times a week. When I think of religion, it is too organized. Religion is really my relationship with God. (Calgary)

There's religion, and there's organized religion. Religion is more important to me. It's my relationship with God. (Toronto 2)

I think it is because religion has been rejected. People previously were proud to go to church but people now hide their faith. (Montreal)

I think spiritual life is more basic than religion. Spiritual life is pure to me. (Montreal)

Religion is a big part of my life yet I don't consider myself to be religious. I have strong beliefs and religion helps support those beliefs but I am not considered religious. (Halifax)

I have a problem with the rules that go on with the church. There is a difference with the church and the belief in God. (Lethbridge)

I feel that I am continually on a journey of [finding out] what spirituality is. I find organized religion too organized-- not enough room for individual exploration. (Vancouver)

This critique of organized religion occurred in several of the groups. For some, the hypocrisy evidenced in the human embodiment of faith was enough to lead them away from religion and towards a personal spirituality. For others, this critique was linked to the various sexual scandals brought to light in recent times. And yet others identified the gendered nature of some religious organizations and how this had led them to identify the “faith as belief” and “faith as organization” distinction. This “I’m not religious but ...” phenomenon parallels in many respects that encountered in feminist identity and belief, to which we now turn.

Feminism

Several themes were similarly detected when the groups were asked to discuss feminism. These themes included:

- The positive consequences of the feminist movement;
- Negative characterization of “feminists” and their actions and the negative consequences of the movement;
- Identifying with feminists;
- Feminism as ‘dead’;
- The juxtaposition of feminism and feminine; and

- The importance of raising ‘feminist’ children.

When women in the groups were asked to discuss what feminism meant to them, the greatest share of responses was positive in tone. A number of these comments reflected on the benefits that resulted directly from the actions of feminists. The most common response related to equality. Whether equality in a general sense, more specifically within the workplace, or equality of opportunity, a number of women associated feminism with the arrival of greater equality for women in society.

[Feminism means] equality; the ability to make choices. (Vancouver)

[Feminism means] equal rights. (Toronto 2)

Feminism was a matter of belonging. Women wanted to belong to society and play a greater role. They wanted to be equals. (Montreal)

A number of women also identified feminism with the gaining of freedom, choice and independence for women.

[Feminism means] independence—period. Not just financial independence. Independence—period. (Montreal)

[A feminist is a] female who does not feel oppressed and feels like she could do whatever wants to do. (Halifax)

[Feminism means] women getting into higher jobs with higher salaries. Expressing opinions and points of view. (Calgary)

Still others highlighted that feminism had provided many women with strength; that is, feminism had empowered women in many ways.

I am a feminist. I think the feminist movement helped out a lot. My mother could not get a mortgage—she was widowed and had 6 children. She earned enough money to pay the mortgage but she could not get one because she was a woman. So financially she was not recognized in the 1960s. [...] [Feminism] gave us equal strength in some ways. (Fredericton)

[Feminism means] empowerment. (Toronto 1)

[A feminist is] a strong woman; one who stands up for herself. (Toronto 1)

[Feminism] gave the average woman courage. (Halifax)

A significant number of women were less positive in their reflections on feminism and feminists. A common characterization of feminists was that of women who were extreme and radical in their beliefs and actions. Other common characterizations identified feminists as ‘anti-

male,' as 'bra-burners,' and as 'butch.' Yet another was the characterization as feminists as aggressive.

The word feminist – as a woman I don't like that word. I am not a male basher. Yes, I have been hurt by males but they are wonderful. I do love men and I do think there are good ones out there. (Winnipeg)

When I first saw the word, women were pushing it in everyone's faces, therefore people started to hate the word. Radicalism. (Vancouver)

I don't agree [with the feminist movement] because they take it to unnecessary extremes – carrying all these posters. Lots of time it does not make sense when they get together. (Toronto 2)

When I think of a feminist, I think of a bitter hardened woman, very militant, very hard edged. I don't see myself that way. (Montreal)

My biggest problem is that to me [feminists] portray themselves as lesbians. (Fredericton)

An additional negative theme running through some of the conversations was the difficulty that feminism had brought to some women's lives. While a number of women highlighted the fact that feminism had provided them with greater choice in their lives, others saw this choice as illusory. Women's increasing movement into the workforce, while viewed in a positive light, also meant that many women are saddled with the double burden of responsibility for the home in addition to work in the public sphere. A few also noted that feminism had simply replaced one set of restrictions (to the private sphere) with another (to the public sphere).

I think it's too bad because some women would like to stay at home and raise the kids for a few years and now that we have fought so hard to get the right to work, it's as if we can't go the other way. (Montreal)

When you work for 40 hours a week and you have to take the kids to soccer practice and put food on the table and your house is a mess – you ask yourself: "What did I get myself into?" This is part of the feminist movement too; it put us in a position where we weren't just one thing, we were many things. I think sometimes the movement has asked a lot of us and the line was crossed where there is only so much of you that you can give and sometimes we forget that the most important thing is to stay at home. (Fredericton)

The third theme relates to women's willingness to self-identify as feminists. In accepting to identify as feminists, a number of the women referred to aspects of their upbringing, elements of their current lives (e.g. their occupations) and/or their beliefs as rationales for their decision. Others self-identified but only upon qualifying the term 'feminist' in some manner.

Yes [I consider myself to be a feminist] but it depends on the definition of feminism. It is most relevant for equal opportunity. I found that for a good portion of my life I was a single mother and trying to support them was very hard. Trying to find a good salary was hard even though I am a smart woman. Equality is important and so is education. [Lethbridge]

I consider myself to be a feminist. This is someone that believes in herself. It is not a matter of whether you are a man or woman. We are people and we respect ourselves. I think feminists are role models and leaders, and to me it means that we are important as people. (Winnipeg)

Yes [I am a feminist] because I raised my children by myself, looked after paying the bills even when I was married. I'm not extreme. Feminism is to be treated equally with equal rights, equal pay. I don't believe that the woman's job is in the home. (Toronto 2)

I am empowered to make my own choices, be in a relationship if I want to, spend my own money the way I want to. I don't have to rely on the male gender or partner; that is how I look at it. (Calgary)

A few admitted that they would adopt the label but only as a result of the conversation that had taken place and points that had been raised within the focus group. For some, that is, they had never consciously evaluated their identification with feminism.

I didn't [consider myself a feminist] until tonight, but I can identify with the belief of the rights, the education, hold[ing] a position in the workforce that is not traditional for women. (Lethbridge)

I never thought of myself as a feminist but the previous description is a good one. (Calgary)

Many more women simply refused to accept the label for themselves, even when admitting that they supported the goals of the movements and the positive changes that had resulted from it. In many of these instances, the unwillingness stemmed from a negative characterization of feminists and/or of their actions. Others rejected the existence of gender differences and discrimination, and a few admitted to having no understanding of the term.

To me feminist is thinking that you are better than the other. I agree with this stuff but I am not a feminist. (Winnipeg)

[Feminists] are women who really hated men. They disagreed with most of the things that men would say or do. They were very anti-men. (Vancouver).

I don't consider myself a feminist (a women burning her bra and looks down on men). I like a lot of things that feminists do but I don't burn my bra. I don't view men as the weaker sex. (Winnipeg)

I am torn. I believe women should get equal pay for equal work. But there are a lot of negative connotations with this – bra burners. (Fredericton)

I am not a feminist. Where I work there are a lot more women than men and I get paid more than some men there. I don't believe that women are not being paid equally to males. There are some differences but it is not a lot. (Fredericton)

I don't have to prove anything. I don't have to fight to be able to go to university. I haven't met any real obstacles in my life. So that's why I am saying that I am not necessarily a feminist. (Montreal)

[Feminism] does not mean anything to me. (Halifax)

The idea that feminism was a movement that no longer had relevance was detected in several of the focus groups. For some, feminism was quite simply something that had occurred in a previous era, and although it may have had important positive consequences for women, it was no longer necessary given the gains that had been made. In other cases this characterization was implied by the statements women made about feminists and feminism: the use of the past tense made clear that feminism was a historical rather than present day term (and can be inferred within a number of the direct quotes listed above).

When I see the word [feminist] I think of the strong women in the past, those who had to fight for things in the past, [who] went to jail. (Vancouver)

[Feminism is] the 1970s. (Lethbridge)

I only know what they accomplished in the past, and I am for that. I have a bad image of the feminist movement which I don't like. The 70s image of the bra burning and not wanting to be equal but wanting to be more like a man. (Calgary)

Some of the other women in the focus groups were quick to point out that although gains had been made, there remained significant work to be accomplished.

I am not a feminist but I applaud those that there are. There is still a ways to go – I am not one of those out there that is pushing because I work in a job where there are more women than men and we get paid equally. I did work in a car dealership once and I was known as the 'girl' and that was a lousy experience. (Fredericton)

It's important, it's important to not forget. I like men by the way. I have nothing against men but it's important to remember that we are not yet equal. I worked for a long time in advertising and it's all men running the show and they hire pretty little girls. They have these sexist hiring policies. (Montreal)

An interesting theme detected across a number of the groups was the juxtaposition of 'feminism' with 'feminine.' In some cases, this stemmed from a need for some members of the

group to distinguish themselves from the negative characterization of feminists. For others, it came more in response to a perceived objective of feminism – to be treated equally with, or more strongly like, men – because this occurred at the cost of the loss of social conventions and rules of etiquette which suggested that men ought to offer women assistance or precedence.

Yes, I consider myself to be a feminist but I am not a bra-burner. I am independent but I would like a man to hold the door open for me. (Winnipeg)

I'm a female and I would like to be treated as a female. I went out with a group of feminist women that didn't want anything to do with men and they get mad when men hold the door for them. (Toronto 2)

I believe in equal rights and equal work but part of me does not want to feel like the man. If I go out on a date, I don't want to pay. I want the man to open the door. But when it comes to the workplace, I want to be equal. (Toronto 1)

I'm a feminist. I've never told a man don't buy me dinner, don't bring me flowers, don't open the door for me. But I'm a feminist. [...] I could be tough when it was time to be tough, but I could be feminine when that was the right thing to do. (Montreal)

I am feminine but not a feminist. I want to be seen as an individual and I have certain rights. (Calgary)

I'm on my own, I have a job, I can support my kids. I don't like the label. I like 'feminine' but not "feminist." (Calgary)

A final theme to be found in the conversations related to the importance that mothers placed on raising children, girls and boys both, to accepted that gender roles were no longer acceptable in society.

[I express myself as a feminist by] teaching my kids. They are learning from me that I am a stay-at-home mom only because I want to be and not that I have to be. (Vancouver)

[I express myself as a feminist through] my two kids (a boy and a girl). I want to raise them equally and show them respect for each other. (Vancouver)

I have five daughters and I encourage them to be whatever they want to be. I think this is being feminist. (Winnipeg)

I have a son who I teach to wash the clothes, clean and how to cook. [...] I want him to be able to look after himself, whether he marries or stays alone. (Winnipeg)

I tell my daughter she has the choice, that she does not have to be dictated by society. It's letting my daughter know that she can be or do anything that she wants to be. (Fredericton)

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this research has been to take a first step in identifying how Canadian women identify and define religion and feminism and to assess the role that it plays in their everyday lives.

The focus groups reveal that religion plays an important role in many Canadian women's lives. At an individual level, women's religious beliefs provide them with set of moral guideposts that leads them to prioritize the community over themselves, at least in terms of the importance that is placed on volunteering in the community. The search for meaning is also identified as an important element of spirituality and religious leaning. Identifying one's place in the larger world is integral to this search. Giving back to others, helping those in need and treating others and one would like to be treated are equated with a 'good' and 'virtuous' life, which has clear and direct implications for political participation. The important role of the religious community in providing a connection to others and a sense of belonging is also revealed, leading many women to focus on community responsibility. Moreover the sense of strength, comfort and peace provided by religion and faith appears crucial for many women in helping them to navigate the difficulties of life.

Many women struggle in a number of ways, however, to reconcile their 'spirituality' with the institutions of religion. The importance in distinguishing the physical and human manifestations of religion from its beliefs, morals and values reflects a natural response to the difficulties faced by organized religion in recent years. It is natural when one considers the multiple benefits that many women derive from their religious beliefs and religious communities; the cognitive dissonance between these clear benefits and the pain and difficulties faced by others because of religious institutions would understandably lead many to distinguish between the two.

This difficulty parallels in many respects that which women face in reconciling the positive benefits that have resulted from feminist struggles and the negative stereotyping of feminists that has occurred in the backlash against the movement in mainstream culture and in the media. Canadian women have a clear sense that feminism has led to greater equality for women, for increased choice and opportunity, and that it has provided women with a stronger voice both in public and in their private lives. But that many exhibit such unease in associating themselves with a movement and its members that have been negatively stereotyped is obvious. Identifying feminists as stereotypes or the movement with its more radical and extreme factions made it difficult for some women to connect its successes for women with their own lives. For others, it demanded a conscious juxtaposition of their femininity with feminism. And yet for other women, the challenges in their own lives stemming from the seeming advantages derived from women's increased movement into the labour force provides them with a particularly critical perspective on feminism.

The perception that feminism is a historical phenomenon, one whose importance and need has since past, was an interesting theme pulled from the focus groups. Whether consciously identifying feminism with a previous period in time (most often the 1970s) or simply in adopting a past tense when discussing the movement, many women do not think of feminism as a phenomenon of much relevance early in the 21st century.

Several important points are to be drawn from this investigation. First, religion plays an important role in the lives of many Canadian women, although the manner in which it is practiced varies widely. For some it is important that it be practiced in an organized setting as part of a community. For others, it occurs on a more individualized basis, more closely identified with spirituality. For some, faith is manifested as a call to action while for others it is more contemplative and instructive for everyday thought and action. The implications of these findings for women's political attitudes and behaviour are obvious and direct. Second, feminism is recognized for the important role that it has played in creating better lives for Canadian women but it appears to have direct and identifiable relevance for only a smaller share of Canadian women. Its role in achieving measures of gender equality and in providing women with choice and voice means that women's expectations and beliefs have changed as well. Conceived of as simply as historical phenomenon or linked with negative stereotypes, however, it is likely to further diminish in importance and relevance with subsequent generations of Canadian women unless the movement is reborn and plays an obvious part in changing women's lives for the better.

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Appendix

The Moderator's Guide employed for each of the focus groups included the following questions on religion and feminism:

RELIGION

- What role, if any, does organized religion play in your life today? Do you consider yourself to be religious? In what ways? What makes you a religious person?
- Is religion something you experience on your own, or do you consider it something you participate in as part of a group?
- Is it possible to consider someone as religious if they do not participate in “organized religion” the way we have defined it here? Why? Why not?
- Are religion and spirituality the same thing? Why? Why not?
- Aside from a place of prayer, are there any other functions that an organized religion or religious group can play?
- Do you do any of these things? Why?

FEMINISM

- What does feminism mean? What does it encompass for you?
- How relevant is feminism to your own life?
- Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? Why? Why not?
- TO FEMINISTS: How do you express yourself as a feminist, if at all? What do you do, say, believe...?
- Is feminism something you can practice on your own, or is it something that is better accomplished as a group? Why?

Endnotes

- ¹ This research was made possible by a standard research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The author additionally wishes to thank the many women who agreed to share their ideas, values and opinions as members of the focus groups.
- ² The focus groups were conducted by Pollara, including the recruitment of participants, the securing of venues, moderating the groups and collecting/transcribing the discussion. I was involved in the development of the recruitment screener (see Appendix), led the development of the moderator's guide and assumed sole responsibility for data analysis.
- ³ The focus group held in Montreal was conducted in French. The discussion was translated into English and transcribed by Pollara.