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**Mother knows best: How listening to Dutch  
Christian mothers can change the way we look at  
religion, calling, and self-sacrifice.**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to provide an account of the lived experiences of Dutch Christian women. It examines their intersections of gender, age, class, and ethnicity within the specific contexts of motherhood and religion. The research draws upon work of Saba Mahmood, Sarah Bracke and Dawn Llewellyn, as well as other feminist theorists. It provides an overview of the Dutch religious context, after which it illustrates how the current research has come to existence as an intervention to the separation between feminist theory and religion studies. The daily experiences of motherhood and faith are analyzed through the concepts of agency, calling, and self-sacrifice. This thesis considers how the accounts of Dutch Christian women can inform the definitions of agency, calling, and self-sacrifice.

## FOREWORD

I want to take a moment to thank all those who helped me in the process of writing this thesis. My partner, for being a rock I can cling to and for letting me recite my words to him. My friends, for their encouraging words, the going on coffee breaks in the library and always believing in me. My supervisor, whose enthusiasm for this research project made continue in those moments I was ready to give up. Thank you all, I could not have done this without you. Most importantly I am grateful to the women who participated in this research, who let me (a stranger) into their homes and granted me the privilege of hearing their life stories.

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## INTRODUCTION

As I get older, I hear more stories from my mother about how she felt when she first had me, her oldest child. I think she used to skip over those stories when I was younger, afraid that it would make me feel unwanted. My mother has always seemed like an enigma to me, I understood that she was a person who had lived 29 full years before I came into existence, she had opinions, desires, goals before I came into her life. I remember multiple occasions when I would ask her what she used to do after school, what kind of sports she used to play, how loved she felt by her friends, etc. I always felt like she could only give me snippets of the truth. Now that I've become a young adult, it seems like we're on equal footing and that she can share more with me. As a writer, I've always enjoyed listening to stories and my mother has always been a fascinating story to try to unravel. Perhaps this is how my interest in studying mothers started, with the first important woman in my life as the starting point for my research years later.

Becoming a mother and following my own mother's footsteps is something that I thought was what I wanted. Yet, after reading Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (2011) and Adrienne Rich's "Of Woman Born" (1986), in which they offer a critique on motherhood, I started questioning this idea. My hesitations about motherhood all come from the idea that I would have to give up a lot of my freedom. As time went on, I became acquainted with more first-time mothers and I wondered about the motivations they had to become mothers. I wondered how these women were structuring their lives as mothers around their own desires. After these ruminations I started wondering about the ways I could perform academical research on motherhood.

The current research is built on previous work on motherhood, in particular feminist work on motherhood and religion. Without these previous works I could not have conducted my research, as it engages with important insights raised in them. My work does not negate previous research, instead it seeks to be a next step in the ways religious women can be studied. As I gathered knowledge on motherhood studies, I learned that "there is an academic silence that means relatively little space has been given to motherhood and mothering" (Llewellyn, 2016, 64). Motherhood has been historically seen as part of the private sphere, which might explain why there has been little academic research done on the experiences of mothers (Aune, 2015; Llewellyn, 2016). At the same time, feminists have pushed motherhood to the background to focus on the ways women can organize themselves publicly (Aune, 2015). Centering mothers

in research thus seems a way to interrupt the maternal silence within the academic world.

Meanwhile, this maternal silence is also felt within the actual lives of women. Dawn Llewellyn (2016) suggests that there are lived maternal silences experienced by women in present-day Christianity. Though motherhood is highly valued within Christianity, little is known about the actual experiences of mothers and their considerations towards motherhood (Llewellyn, 2016). Llewellyn's research interrupts the maternal silence by narrating the experiences of voluntarily childless British Christian women. In doing so, Llewellyn's work answers to the call formulated by Samira Kawash (2011) that more research is needed on the intersections of religion and motherhood.

My research tries to answer to the call for more research on the intersections of religion and motherhood (Kawash, 2011), by turning the lens to Christian Dutch mothers. My research will thus engage with the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, and age in the specific context of religiosity and motherhood. I believe that narrating their experiences will provide us with new insights into the lives of Dutch Christian women. This narration is based on the content I gathered in interviews with these women. I see the interviewing process as a "co-creation of meaning" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, 132), which means that the participants raised topics and my responses or further questioning led to certain answers. Another researcher and other participants would have probably had very different conversations. Another researcher might have asked very different questions. That does not mean, however, that the account I will provide here is useless. The diversity of possible accounts illustrates the complexity of women's lives.

The current research thus seeks to answer the question: how do Dutch Christian women negotiate between motherhood and faith? I focus on their lived experiences of both motherhood and religion. To answer the research question, I will provide a brief account on the background of religion within the Dutch context in the first chapter. After that I will provide more information on the complicated relationship between feminist theory, motherhood and religion.

The second chapter will explore the theoretical concepts used to analyze the content of the interviews: agency, calling, and self-sacrifice. I build upon Saba Mahmood's (2001) and Sarah Bracke's (2003; 2008) work on agency, they propose that the meaning of agency should be explored within the grammar of concepts in which it

resides. The current research thus tries to explore agency within the religious concepts the participants mention, I do not try to frame their words in an accessible secular grammar, however, I want to analyze their opinions in their own religious grammars. Calling is such a concept that lies within Christian religious grammars. Within Dawn Llewellyn's work, Christian women decided not to have children because that would interfere with their spiritual calling. I am therefore interested to see how the participants think about calling and how motherhood has influenced it, according to them. In discourses around motherhood, self-sacrifice is a concept that is often named, as mothers feel that they want to and have to sacrifice a part of themselves (Baker, 2009; Grey, 1991; Oh, 2010). This research explores how the participants see self-sacrifice within their motherhood practices.

The third chapter will focus on the methodology of this research project, it includes an account of feminist epistemology, an account of the sample of participants used in this research. I also give an account of my position as a researcher within this chapter and explain how my social location has influenced the research. Furthermore, I provide an account of the way in which my analysis was performed.

Following that is the fourth chapter, which narrates the analyzed accounts of the participants' lived experiences. It will go into their desires, religious practices, their thoughts on vulnerability, as well as their thoughts on pursuing a calling and being able to engage in their hobbies. Their accounts are useful in opening the ways we think about calling, religion, and self-sacrifice. The current research proves that it is important to interrupt the maternal silence, as it opens up the floor for more complex accounts of motherhood.

## CHAPTER 1: A BACKGROUND IN DUTCH RELIGIOUS HISTORY, MOTHERHOOD STUDIES, FEMINIST THEORY AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

In order to write about Dutch Christian women, I find it necessary to provide a short overview of the Dutch religious context. After this I will proceed to discuss previous work on religion and motherhood by feminist scholars. As an academic, my research is informed by those who have come before me and who have asked important questions on this topic. I therefore find it important to provide a background on what has already been pointed out in previous research, as this background will bring us to the necessity of the current research.

### *1.1 Dutch context*

Religion has played an important role in the formation of what is currently known as the Netherlands. The Netherlands were part of the Empire of Charles V, and as his Empire was based on Catholic rule, so were the Netherlands. Dutch people were, however, influenced by the ideas of thinkers such as Erasmus and Luther. In the 1560s a revolt started against the government of the Habsburg Netherlands, and twenty years later the liberated north provinces together formed a new political entity, the Protestant Dutch Republic (van Rooden, 2004; van Eijnatten and van Lieburg, 2005). Spain and the Southern Netherlands states remained at war with the Dutch Republic until 1648, when this region was annexed by the Dutch Republic (van Rooden, 2004).

The formation of the Dutch Republic is thus closely linked with Protestantism, in particular with the Calvinist public church, whose predominance was determined at the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-1619 (van Rooden, 1995). Other religious beliefs were tolerated in the Republic as well, and because of this, the Netherlands became known for its tolerance (van Rooden, 2004). Tolerance in this specific context meant that religious groups which were seen as inherently foreign were allowed a public presence, but Dutch religious groups other than the Calvinists, such as the Catholics were not allowed to be that publicly present (van Rooden, 1995). During the invasion by the French in 1795, religion was pushed to the background, the new Dutch union would only know citizens, not separate religious groups (van Rooden, 1995; van Rooden, 2004). After the defeat of Napoleon, the Kingdom of the Netherlands was installed, and Protestantism was again brought to the foreground (van Rooden, 1995). Catholics had



been discriminated against ever since the birth of the Dutch Republic, and in 1880 they started to organize themselves as a group. They developed their own marked rituals and symbolic public presences, to illustrate that they were a separate moral community. This is how Dutch pillarization first came into being (van Rooden, 1995). When the Dutch constitution was written in 1917, the right to organize oneself publicly in order to maintain one's religion was officially recognized. From that moment on, Dutch society has been firmly established on the four religious-ideological pillars of Calvinism, Catholicism, Socialism and Liberalism (Prins, 2002). This pillarization or '*verzuiling*' was an institutionalized segmentation, which meant that businesses and public spaces catered to one specific pillar. The Dutch political landscape has been built upon this pillarization, as political parties were formed to represent their corresponding pillar.

The pillarized political landscape changed, however, after World War II when the Netherlands was introduced to several migration flows. The first consisted of inhabitants of the former East Indies, arriving after the independence of Indonesia in 1949 (Prins, 2002). Later, in the 1950s and 1960s they were joined by guest workers from Spain, Greece, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Morocco, Turkey, and later a large-scale process of immigration from Surinam started after the expiry of the immigration treaty (Prins, 2002). These immigrant groups were encouraged to integrate with maintenance of their own identity, which would strengthen and empower people (Prins, 2002). The Netherlands had thus become a multicultural society. Though Christianity had gradually lost its importance to the Dutch people, immigrants found ways to organize themselves to maintain their religious beliefs. They held onto their beliefs and felt that they could express them freely in the Netherlands (Prins, 2002). However, at the start of the 1990s, political parties found integration of immigrants more important than maintenance of cultural and religious identity, which signals "a determined defense of the achievements of European civilization such as the universal values of secularization" and (notably) Islamic values did not coincide with these (Prins, 2002, 367). Dutch feminists have often gone along with these ideas, arguing that multiculturalism is bad for women, and have coupled women's emancipation to gay emancipation which needs to be protected from Islam (Bracke, 2012).

It is within this context that I write this research. Religious women are often seen as women who are blinded to their own oppression by being part of an institutionalized religion (Aune, 2015). The current research tries to form a counter-

narrative to this idea. In the following section I will discuss the points raised by several researchers (Aune, 2015; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska, 2013), arguing that a connection should be formed between feminist theory and religious feminism, as it can help in forming a grounded narrative on women's religious lives.

### 1.2 Feminism and Religion

Feminist theologians have generated very useful resources for women. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, has argued that the Bible contains glimpses of women's spiritual practices and history, one of these is a moment in 1 Tim. 2:12, in which a student of Paul bans women as teachers within the early Church. According to Radford Ruether, this suggests that women did exercise leadership and prophetic teaching in some early Christian churches which believed that redemption resulted in a "new humanity" that overcomes gender hierarchy", and this letter was an answer to the controversy sparked by these ideas (Radford Ruether, 1999, 98). Her interpretation of this text indeed shows us a glimpse of women's spiritual practices and history. Other feminist theologians have written counter interpretations of the Bible<sup>1</sup>, or have reconstructed Biblical texts<sup>2</sup> (Yazbeck Haddad & Esposito, 2001).

While conducting a literary research on lived experiences of Christian women, I noticed that scholars have critiqued the fact that little work has been done to generate a discourse on the ways in which religion adds a new layer of complexion in these women's lives. Religion is often acknowledged as an influence on women's broader cultural identity, but lived religious experiences, theology, practices, text, and dogma, are mostly unexamined (Llewellyn, 2015). This occlusion is emblematic of the

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more, read Phyllis Trible's work on the interpretations of the Old Testament. She suggests that traditional interpretations have been done from a patriarchal perspective. Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of terror: Literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*. Vol. 13. Fortress Press, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> If interested in reading feminist deconstructions of the Bible, read:

Bellis, A. O. (2007). *Helpmates, harlots, and heroes: Women's stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press.

Newsom, C. A., & Ringe, S. H. (Eds.). (1998). *Women's Bible commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press.

Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (1993). But she said. *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, 54, 344-344.

Schüssler Fiorenza, E., Matthews, S. and Graham Brock, A. eds. *Searching the scriptures: A feminist commentary*. Vol. 2. Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993.

disciplinary disconnection between feminist studies and religious feminism: feminist studies has been critiqued for neglecting women's religiosity and spirituality, and religious feminism was on the other hand critiqued for being hesitant in engaging with wider developments in gender theory (Llewellyn, 2015). While feminist theology recognizes that women's experiences are not included into official theological culture (Radford Ruether, 1999) and tries to counteract this, often experiences of white, heterosexual, wealthy and educated women became essentialized as 'woman' and 'woman's experience' by failing to account for differences between women; the experiences of non-white, queer, genderqueer and poor women were marginalized (Llewellyn, 2015).

Where feminist theology has been critiqued for essentializing 'woman', feminism's neglect of women's spirituality has also become problematized. When religion is considered in feminist writings, it is often treated as paradoxical and a specialist area of interest rather than it being examined in terms of women's theological viewpoints, their religious and spiritual practices, or a vital structuring factor that shapes the way they attribute meaning and value (Llewellyn, 2015). Religion is often seen as a confining institution, which is ineffective in offering women constructive resources according to Dawn Llewellyn and Marta Trzebiatowska (2013). I do not wish to state that religion is never used as a confining institution, but I think it is important to recognize that interpreting religion as a category of identity can enhance our understanding of the way faith works in people's lives. Religion is often missing from the list of race, class, ethnicity and culture, but it is a factor that can intersect with all these categories and can also be sub-divided (Llewellyn, 2015) "The religious and spiritual can be broken down according to tradition, denomination, or any number of variances, which can add layers of complexity to how women define themselves. In overlooking religion, third wave feminism brackets out the complicated work religions do, in their many complex forms, in people's lives" (Llewellyn, 2015, 48). I see what Llewellyn describes here as an argument for the need to understand that religion is not a fixed entity, its traditions can differ, according to denomination, and culture.

For feminism to truly understand the ways in which religion adds layers to a woman's life, it must learn to understand the language of religious women through engagement and dialogue (Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska, 2013). The current research seeks to engage in dialogue with Christian Dutch women and learn about their experiences. I see experience as Llewellyn defines it: "a complex and intricate category

because it remains more useful and productive to draw on women's experiences than to leave their stories unheard and therefore unknown" (Llewellyn, 2015, 22). I seek to analyze the women who participate in this study while reflecting their own religious language. What is also important to recognize is that these women's testimonies about their religious lives and my analysis of it are representations of their actual experiences, which grants us access to the framework in which the experiences of these women occur (Llewellyn, 2015).

When bringing together feminist discourse and religion, we can see that women find ways to transcend oppressive practices within religion, as well as society. They have found ways to define themselves in relation to the divine. For some, this involves reinterpreting and deconstructing the Bible or preaching. Some women have found practices at home which have empowered them, such as guiding their husbands (or partners) and children through their spiritual journeys (Radford Ruether, 1987).

Motherhood can also be seen as one of the practices in which women have been able to define themselves in relation to the divine. It is a way to achieve self-expression, as well as have a sense of authority and community (Young, 1999). In the following section, I will generate an account of previous research on motherhood within feminist studies, and how in relating motherhood to religion, we can gain new insights into the lives of religious mothers.

### *1.3 Religion and Motherhood*

The first book I encountered that connected motherhood to a feminist discourse was "Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution" by Adrienne Rich (1986). After experiencing her own frustrations during her journey within motherhood, she theorized two meanings of motherhood: the possible relationship of a woman to her powers of reproduction and to her children; and the institution, which aspires to ensure that that possible relationship remains under male control (O'Reilly, 2004; Rich, 1986). Accordingly, Rich introduced the term "mothering" which refers to women's own experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and are potentially empowering to women (O'Reilly, 2004). Rich demonstrated how motherhood can be used to oppress women, and as a response, other feminist scholars followed in studying motherhood. Rich's book inspired me and enabled me to form my first ideas on this research topic. However, Rich's theorizations have also generated critique, which have led to further theorizations on motherhood. I will now move on to illustrate how the

critiques of Rich's work on motherhood have led to the current research, and how the current research is a needed intervention.

The most pronounced critique on Rich (1986) is her essentialization of mothers, as she overlooks important differences between mothers and sees the 'institution' of motherhood as homogeneous (Jeremiah, 2004). An illustration of this argument is Rich's mention of matrilineal societies, which she treats as a thing of the past even though there are matrilineal societies to this day (Watson-Franke, 2004). As Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke illustrates in her research, within matrilineal societies, women are not bound to a husband as they build strong socioeconomic ties with their brothers. Furthermore, within this context, mothers are given more privileges than men because they determine the continuation of generations (Watson-Franke, 2004). This form of institutional motherhood thus generates positive outcomes for women, different from the Western institution of motherhood.

The previous example illuminates the need for different approaches within maternal studies that account for differences between mothers. An important aspect of women's lives that has become under-researched in maternal studies is religion (Llewellyn, 2016). As I have argued before, feminist thinking has often dismissed the significant source of meaning that religion can be in human's lives today (Kawash, 2011). This phenomenon is also visible in Christian spirituality, where scant resources for mothers are provided, even though pregnancy and motherhood continue to be a central feature of the lives of many women, and Christian women need spiritual resources that resonate with these experiences, with both the joy and the pains of motherhood (Holness, 2004).

Christian women need these resources, as well as the academic world as there is little knowledge about the considerations and concerns Christian women have toward motherhood (Llewellyn, 2016). Dawn Llewellyn (2016) argues that "it is likely the processes through which Christian women become, or do not become mothers and caregivers of children are deeply significant and an important site through which to understand how women navigate their gendered, religious identities". Llewellyn then moves on to pose that this absence of faith perspectives in motherhood studies and feminist religious and theological studies signals a 'maternal silence' in academic and Christian discourses (2016). Within her own research, Llewellyn interrupts this maternal silence by analyzing the experiences of Christian women who have remained voluntarily childless. The insights her research provides are highly informative, and I'd

like to expand on her research by breaking the maternal silence through giving voice to Christian women who are mothers, in the hopes of capturing an account of the complexities and nuances of the cultural milieu unique to these mothers (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Rye, 2016).

#### *1.4 Conclusion*

The current chapter provided an account of the Dutch context in which religion has historically played an important role. However, as time progressed religion became less important to the Dutch people, and nowadays religious women are often seen as blind to their own oppression (Aune, 2015). I have narrated that by joining religion and feminist theory, we can start to understand the complexity of religious women's lived experiences. Joining these two will also provide useful insights in the study of motherhood, as it will enhance our understanding of the complex lives of Dutch Christian mothers.

## CHAPTER 2: CALLING, SELF-SACRIFICE AND THE GLUE HOLDING THIS RESEARCH TOGETHER, AGENCY

As I have previously described, the current research attempts to create an account of the lived experiences of Dutch Christian women as they negotiate motherhood and their religion. To analyze the content of each interview, I will draw upon concepts that have been useful in previous studies on religious women. These concepts are agency, calling, and self-sacrifice. In discourses around religious women, it is often assumed that these women cannot be agents as liberal views of agency contradict religious understandings of it (Aune, 2015; Mahmood, 2001). I therefore deem it necessary to include agency in an analysis of religious women. The current research will explore agency within the religious grammar of the participants, in line with previous feminist work (Bracke, 2008; Mahmood, 2001), to learn that the participants are in fact agents. I have included the concept of calling, as it offers another possibility of analyzing the participants within their own religious grammar. Mothers often describe their need to sacrifice parts of themselves for their children (Baker, 2009). I have included self-sacrifice as a theoretical concept as I wish to analyze the participants' views on it, as well as relate self-sacrifice to their religious views. In the following section I will provide a theoretical background on each concept and illustrate why these concepts can provide an interesting starting point of analysis in the current research.

### *2.1 Agency*

A concept that has often been used to study women's participation in religious movements is agency. Even though women's participation in these movements would have been explained as 'false consciousness' in the past, there has been an increasing discomfort with such explanations (Bracke, 2003; Mahmood, 2001). The study of agency has proven useful in questions of the generating of subjectivity, issues of identity, as well as notions of performativity and ethnomethodological approaches (Bracke, 2003). Even though the question of agency has enabled important insights, its usage can be problematic. It is therefore important to examine the theoretical work that 'agency' performs (Bracke, 2008). Often, studies on pious women that take a women's studies approach focus on agency, in contrast to mainstream scholarship which attends to structural power relations. This contrast results in a problematic division of labor,

which produces a poor understanding of agency through removing structural constraints and conditions from the very notion of agency (Bracke, 2003; Bracke, 2008).

Another point of criticism arises from the work of Talal Asad (1996), in which he argues that believers often assert that circumstances “outside of their own will” or conditions “of divine intervention” made them into a believer or push them to act in a certain way (Asad, 1996, 271; Bracke, 2008). Despite this, researchers insist that believers are agents. Even though researchers shy away from the false consciousness scheme, Bracke (2008) argues that the insistence on agency in the religious discourse works in more or less the same way, asserting that “they might say they don’t know what happened, when in fact they were exercising their own free choice” (62). Religious discourses thus seem to become interpreted in a secularist way, in which researchers enforce their own understanding of religion onto the words of believers. This phenomenon can be traced to a doctrine of agency, as coined by Asad (1996), which has become crucial to our acknowledgement of other’s humanity.

Saba Mahmood (2001) argues that this model of agency limits our capability to understand and examine the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions. She recognizes that women’s agency has often been understood as “the capacity to realize one’s own interest against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (206). In this line of reasoning, she continues that what is seldom problematized in these analyses is the universality of desire to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination (Mahmood, 2001). Agency has thus become linked with resistance, which is a result of feminism’s dual character as an analytic and politically prescriptive project (Mahmood, 2001). She argues that the meaning of agency needs to be explored within the grammar of concepts in which it resides and suggests that we think of agency as “a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood, 2001, 203). This resonates with Spivak’s criticisms on the exclusions of European epistemic regimes in which female subaltern subjectivity and agency remain illegible (Bracke, 2008; Spivak, 1988).

But then what does agency mean in relation to specifically religious grammars? Bracke (2008) explores this through the notion of submission and found out that her participant’s subjectivity was marked by a desire to submit to God. The relative autonomy that her participant obtained is “legible by secular liberal frameworks (as



agency), while at the same time those frameworks also read her submission as lack of agency. What often remains unrecognized is the connection between this mode of submission and relative autonomy and agency” (63). This connection can be made when we link agency to questions of subjectivity. Bracke does so through Foucault’s understanding of subjectivation, which are the modes in which human beings are made into subjects and argues that the conditions that bring about subordination are themselves a source of subjectivity and hence agency (Bracke, 2008).

As Sarah Bracke points out: “religious agencies and subjectivities urge us to rethink vocabularies and understandings of the forces that constitute and drive subjects” (2008, 63). I therefore think it will be useful to analyze agency within the current research, as it will give us a greater understanding of the desires and thus of the lives of the women I will interview. In this research I will explore the meaning of agency within the specific context of the participants by mapping out their desires and the ways they achieve them. In doing so, I relate the formation of their desires back to their specific theological background, as Mahmood (2001) argues. I will also be connecting agency to calling and self-sacrifice, through Sarah Bracke’s (2008) work on submission in which she argues that submission can be read as a lack of agency, but in connecting it to the specific context of her participant she shows that submission grants agency. Calling and self-sacrifice seem to be two concepts which imply a lack of agency as well, but when analyzing it through the specific contexts of the participants, we can see that they are agents within calling and self-sacrifice.

## *2.2 Calling*

In a previous study on Christian women, Dawn Llewellyn (2016) mentioned that these women had chosen to remain childless, as they felt that motherhood would interfere with their religious calling. As the current study builds upon Llewellyn’s work, I am interested in understanding how Christian women who did become mothers think about calling.

In order to do so, it is important to understand what the term calling means. Usually, the concept embodies a sense of purpose and meaning, a passion, and giftedness; it is a direction believers want to follow and, in the Christian understanding, feel that God has placed within their hearts (Longman, Dahlvig, Wikkerink, Cunningham, & O’Connor, 2011; Schermer Sellers, Thomas, Batts, & Ostman, 2005). Calling has been described as a transcendent summons by God (Swezey, 2009), in

which specific gifts, talents, and strengths, received from God can be used. Once a person engages in self-reflection, prayer and meditation, they will learn to understand God's calling for their specific talents and they will eventually be able to contribute to the good of humanity (Longman et al., 2011). A Christian calling is concerned with helping others and this can be traced back to the Calvinist doctrine, which motivated people to work hard to prove their worthiness of salvation (Scott, 2002; Swezey, 2009). When answering their calling, Christians thus feel that their lives have meaning and make a difference (Swezey, 2009). However, calling can also be used by non-religious individuals, who view talents and strengths as an innate part of themselves and reflect in internal source of calling (Longman et al., 2011). It thus seems that calling describes a purpose of life, related to one's own talents and strengths.

In a particularly insightful study, Longman et al. (2011) conceptualized calling and in doing so have created two continuums in which calling can be located. Calling can either be general or specific. The participants in their study who saw calling as general felt that following God's will is a state of mind or lifestyle, rather than a defined checklist or tasks to accomplish (Longman et al., 2011). This view of calling reflects the idea that God gives individuals talents and that the individuals are free to choose in which way to use them. Other participants felt that God called them to a particular task that works toward a master plan. These differences in perception of calling might be influenced by the participants' religious backgrounds (Longman et al., 2011), which can hinder or aid them in their ability to pursue their calling. Other contextual factors influencing this ability are family realities, which can contribute to women's sense of self; life circumstances, having a newborn might hinder women's ability to pursue their calling, for example; and cultural expectations, which impact all areas of life (Longman et al., 2011).

In previous research with Christian women, calling has often been used to describe work choices these women made, and motherhood has often been described as causing a tension to the ability of pursuing that calling (Longman et al., 2011; Schermer Sellers et al., 2005). In this current research, I try to approach calling as proposed by Longman et al. (2011), as a passion which can be influenced by different factors and which can be developed and defined thanks to the participants' engagement their own talents and strengths. I will be asking them how they see calling and I will be attentive to their narration of the way they try to live their lives according to God's plan. I am also interested in relating the outcomes of this research to Dawn Llewellyn's work

(2016). It seems to me that in Longman et al.'s definition of calling (2011), motherhood can be seen as a hindering factor in the ability to pursue one's own calling, but perhaps calling could also be understood as a more dynamic concept. Perhaps motherhood will influence their sense of calling and thus actually provide an incentive for pursuing their calling.

### *2.3 Self-sacrifice*

Within older Christian discourse women are generally blamed for the fall of mankind. It was a woman who brought sin into Eden. In that discourse it is often said that woman can be saved through motherhood. By undergoing her suffering, she will be admitted to heaven (Grey, 1991). Yet it is not only within Christian discourse that motherhood has become associated with self-sacrifice and suffering. As Bonnie Miller McLemore (Miller-McLemore, 1999) notes, motherhood became intertwined with self-sacrifice in Western society, not just as a result of nineteenth-century Victorian values, but also because of older historical and religious notions, such as "Christian edicts of suffering servanthood, Jewish ideals of maternal self-sacrifice, Aristotelian and Christian codes defining the relationship between subordinate and superior family members, and other powerful motifs" (Miller-McLemore, 1999, 292). In her research, Joanne Baker (2009) mentions that even current representations of motherhood are centered on the mothers ability to be on top of her career, to be a loving wife, and a doting, self-sacrificing mother. Those who do not succeed in achieving these states are often described as unwomanly (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Rye, 2016). Mothers often mention the need to put their children first, they feel like their role is 'being there' for their children (Baker, 2009).

Within feminist thought, self-sacrifice and caring for others have received negative critiques. Catharine MacKinnon argued that women who promote caring for others are endorsing their own oppression (Cawston & Archer, 2018; MacKinnon, 1987). In line of that thought, it seems that women are valued according to the care they give others, and self-sacrificial, caring traits that make women suitable subjects for cooperative willing subordination are glorified (Groenhout, 2003; MacKinnon, 1987). It is especially within motherhood that a relationship in which care is seen most clearly, and a mother's eagerness to give up everything for the sake of her children is idealized as the culmination of caring behavior (Groenhout, 2003). Though I agree with MacKinnon's sentiment of being critical of the glorification of self-sacrificing mother,

I do wonder how this self-sacrifice can be understood within this context. Is self-sacrifice always diminishing one's autonomy? Would self-sacrifice be acceptable to MacKinnon if there was still a sense of autonomy?

A definition of self-sacrifice is necessary here, and Cawston and Archer (2018) explain self-sacrifice as the independent act, adaptation, or tendency to relinquish one's autonomous will. There are several versions of self-sacrifice, the first being self-immolation in which the autonomous will is destroyed as is the case with one who would undergo brainwashing (Cawston & Archer, 2018). The second version is self-annunciation in which the autonomous will is not destroyed but is given up in compliance with another; in this case, autonomy will return after it ceases being delegated to the other (Cawston & Archer, 2018). The third version is self-effacement, the devaluation of the autonomous will. In which the autonomous will is seen as unworthy of consideration (Cawston & Archer, 2018). There is, however, one version of self-sacrifice in which autonomy can be preserved, namely self-donation, which involves "making a gift of one's self to another and is purposive and self-affirming. Someone who makes a gift of herself to another simply endorses her own value by deeming it worthy of being gifted" (Cawston & Archer, 2018, 463).

Understanding self-sacrifice and the ways in which it can be performed enhances our understanding of motherhood and its relationship to self-sacrifice. As most mothers in a previous study noted that to them, self-sacrifice referred to the amount of time and money spent on their children's needs rather than their own (Baker, 2009). These mothers thus gift themselves in giving their time and money to their children, and in that way seem to retain their autonomous will.

Ruth Groenhout (2003) finds another counterargument to MacKinnon's view by stating that human nature should only be understood in relational terms, and by doing so, care will start to look less like sacrifice. She relates this to Christian thought, stating that all humans are children of God, thus creating an equal base for humans. She states that "self-love and other-love must be largely equal" (2003, 166) and notes that this places a limit on self-sacrifice.

As I set out to do this research, I expected the participants to mention all the time they had to sacrifice for their children. I expected them to feel like they had to sacrifice parts of themselves for their child. These assumptions were informed by accounts on motherhood I had read by, for example, Adrienne Rich (1986), but probably also by internalized conceptions about mothers having to be self-sacrificing.

Reading other theories on self-sacrifice opened up my mind to the different ways in which we can understand self-sacrifice. In the current research, I will ask the participants whether they feel they have to self-sacrifice, how they define self-sacrifice and how they relate to it. I am particularly interested in seeing whether they engage with self-sacrifice in the same manner as Groenhout does.

#### *2.4 Conclusion*

This chapter tried to provide a theoretical background to the concepts of agency, calling, and self-sacrifice. In line with previous works on agency, I thus argued that the current research will engage with the participants within their own religious grammars. Therefore I chose to analyze the participants through calling and self-sacrifice. Viewing their lived experiences through these lenses will enhance our understanding of the complexity of their lives, as well as the ways agency, calling, and self-sacrifice themselves play out in the participants' lives. Perhaps their narrations will encourage us to redefine these concepts.

## CHAPTER 3: FEMINIST RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

With feminist research comes feminist research practice. In the following section I will provide some information on feminist epistemology and explain how the current research is based on standpoint epistemology. After this, I will start with an account of my positionality as a feminist researcher (Rich, 2013). I will go into my social location and how it has influenced the way I conduct research. I will also provide examples of moments during the research process when I was confronted with my own biases and expectations, and I will explain how I dealt with these moments. I will then provide an account of the interviewing process and the ways in which feminist interviewing has been described in previous research. After that, I will provide information on the sample of participants, and lastly, I will relate more information on the process of analysis within this research.

### *3.1 Feminist Epistemology*

There are different views on how feminist research should be conducted, which are called ‘epistemologies’. An epistemology is a “theory of knowledge” (Harding, 1991) that defines a set of beliefs about the social world and about who can be a knower and what can be known (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). An epistemology thus determines what criteria should be met in order to assess knowledge production as scientific and academic (Lykke, 2010). Characteristic to feminist discourse is the critique of hegemonic discourses on gender, race, class, and sexuality. Feminist research thus challenges traditional sciences, as the natural and social sciences throughout their history have upheld and legitimized biologically determinist and culturally essentialist perceptions of gender in its intersections with other sociocultural categories. This results in a strong interest in epistemology and in the criteria that define what science is (Lykke, 2010).

According to Sandra Harding (1991), three different feminist epistemologies can be identified: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemology, and postmodern feminist epistemology. Important to recognize is that these epistemological positions are parallelly used throughout the history of Feminist Studies (Lykke, 2010). Neither is there *a* feminist epistemology, as the field is in constant dialogue with different fields, which result in intersections with different types of anti-racist,

postcolonial, anti-capitalist and queer theoretical debates on epistemologies (Lykke, 2010).

Feminist empiricism is informed by the idea that inadequacies in following standard methods and norms are the cause of sexist and androcentric results of research, and it is in working with these methods and norms that they try to produce more adequate results of research (Harding, 1993). Involving women in research projects as research subjects, will then erase that gender bias (Lykke, 2010). Feminist standpoint theorists, however, think that this only solves part of the problem. They argue that these methods and norms are too weak to allow researchers to systematically identify and eliminate, from the results of research, the social values, interests, and agendas that are held by all members of the scientific community (Harding, 1993). The positionality of individual thinkers – in terms of gender, class, age, race, religion – affects the kind of research projects they are likely to engage in (Braidotti, 2003). According to this view, including marginalized peoples in research can serve as the “starting off thought”, as their locations will generate critical questions of knowledge that cannot arise in thought starting from dominant groups lives (Harding, 1993, 50). Starting off research from women’s lives will therefore generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives, but also of men’s lives and the social order (Harding, 1993). As the current research engaged with the lived experiences of Dutch Christian mothers, it can be concluded that this research was informed by standpoint epistemology. Not only were these women involved in the research, but their opinions were necessary to ‘start off thought’ in order to gain more insights into the lived of Dutch Christian women and the ways in which they experience motherhood and their religion.

### *3.2 My ‘politics of location’ (Rich, 2013)*

As I mentioned before, my position as an individual thinker affects the kind of research projects I will engage with (Braidotti, 2003). This is in line with Adrienne Rich’s work (Rich, 2013) on the politics of location. She reflected on the ways that her being white and a woman have enabled and disabled her to enter certain spaces. Rich criticized the fact that white feminists often make generalized statements, such as “all women”, while these women, in fact did not know what black women, for example, experienced. I think Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is of use here as well, as she theorized the fact that one’s gender, race, class provide one with distinct experiences which someone else from a different gender, race, or class will not experience. For

example, a white woman is oppressed within the patriarchy, while a black woman faces white supremacy on top of that. The research projects I engage with will thus be affected by my a white, middle-class, Dutch Christian woman. My identity has most likely influenced the spaces I have been allowed to enter, which have in turn formed my interests and personhood.

The current research has also been influenced by my identity. Since I am white, just as the participants, the results might be different from when a person of color had conducted the research. I did not have to deal with racist assumptions from the participants, which researchers of color might have had to deal with. As I am able bodied and middle class, travelling to the participants was easy for me, which might not have been as easy for someone who is dealing with disabilities or from a lower class. Furthermore, even though I am a queer woman, I am straight-passing and I think this also helped in the interview process. I do not want to generalize the participants, but in some of the conversations it came up that some of the participants are critical of ‘secular’ behavior, and they see homosexuality as one of those behaviors. Would I have looked queerer than I do, I think these participants might have treated me differently and perhaps they would not have been as open with me as they were. Additionally, of course my being Dutch was of great help in the interviews, since the participants and I were both able to talk in our mother tongues and thus talk more in-depth than when we had been speaking in English. I think it also helped that we share the same culture, we did not need to explain certain cultural concepts to each other. My Christianity also seemed to provide a basis from which the participants and I could engage in deeper conversations about religion than when I would have been non-religious.

However, all these examples I have provided might also have caused me to make assumptions about what the participants were telling me and not explicitly ask for their clarifications on certain topics. For example, I did not ask each participant what their praying rituals are, as I assumed that we all prayed in the same way. Yet, Laura told me very specifically about her praying behaviors which opened my eyes that I had missed an opportunity in clarifying this with other participants.

As I have noted before, another researcher who is less privileged or identifies very differently from me, would have possibly asked very different questions or behaved very differently from me. In that way, where I come from and what I am interested in will always impact the research I conduct.



There were some instances in which I was reminded of my positionality and the ways I was affecting the research process. At the start of the research, I noticed that in some interviews, the participants were more talkative about their experiences of motherhood than their lived religion and vice versa. At first, I tried to push these women to talk more about the other topics, but I then reminded myself that I had started this research to create a space for these women's experiences. I had wanted to represent their opinions in an honest way, but now I was trying to shape their stories into a narrative that I wanted to happen. I was confronted with my own positionality as a researcher and my expectations of the research outcomes. This process helped me in reflecting more on my work as a researcher. I then decided that I would give more space to the women during the interviews, when I would notice that they had more interest in talking about a specific topic, I would give them more time and would put more energy in discussing that topic as (much as) they wanted.

On entering this research project, I had decided that I wanted to discuss sacrifice with the participants. In the work of Irene Oh (2010), I came across the idea that within Christianity, maternal love is seen as selfless, and mothers should be willing to make certain sacrifices. My idea of the sacrifices that mothers make were related to career choices (having to work less) and to my ideas of how a mother's life becomes centered around her child. In my mind, having to give up a career is a sacrifice with a negative outcome, as it would mean not being able to pursue what I find important. However, during the interviews I started noticing that most mothers did not see staying at home with their children or working less as a sacrifice, they saw it as a blessing. They enjoyed it. They did acknowledge that they had to sacrifice time to themselves now that they had a child, but that was not necessarily a negative thing.

I then understood that I had been pushing my ideas of sacrifice onto the participants. Seeing sacrifice as negative is, I think, informed by secularist thought. However, within Christian discourse, sacrifice is a very important theme. Christ's death on the cross is seen as liberating his followers from "the fear of death", and it was his obedience to God in this sacrifice that makes its effects eternal (Nelson, 2003). His sacrifice is thus seen as a positive theme in Christianity. As I was not taking this definition of sacrifice with me into the research, I was not engaging with the same discourse as the Christian women that I wanted to learn about. After this realization, and in keeping in mind that sacrifice is not necessarily negative, I noticed that my

interviews started to gain more depth. The participants reflected on their sacrifices more freely and we could discuss their joys and sorrows more intimately.

### *3.3 Feminist Ways of Interviewing*

A method to understand the lived experiences of participants is the in-depth interview, as it is issue-oriented, and can be used to gain focused insight into a specific topic (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Within feminist studies, interviewing is an important tool to generate data to highlight women's issues to a larger population (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Interviewing can generate data on the self, lived experiences, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge, or perspective. In-depth interviews can thus grant more complex and coherent data than surveys would. Important to hold in mind, however, is that interviews are susceptible to participants withholding certain information if the truth is inconsistent with their preferred self-image or if they wish to impress the interviewer (Beitin, 2014). The current research uses in-depth interviews as a method to gather data, because I wanted to explore the lived experiences of these mothers, and I decided that this method would grant me a more complex and complete insight into that what I wanted to find out. Therefore, the fact that certain details might be withheld could be accepted, as the rest of the interview would generate more data than a survey research would be able to. Furthermore, I assumed that the participants were not as likely to withhold important information as the topic of the research was not a sensitive one. The women were happy to talk about motherhood and their faith.

The interviews were conducted face to face, as Hesse-Biber (2007) argued that this ensures the establishing of rapport between the researcher and the interviewee, and it also gives the researcher the opportunity to respond to visual cues and verbal cues, such as gestures and eye contact. I visited the participants in their homes, as I wanted to make sure that the research would be a small as possible impediment to their daily lives. I also wanted the participants to feel as comfortable as possible in an interview setting, and I had guessed that this would best be achieved in doing the interviews in the safety of their homes. In conversing with the participants, I gathered that they enjoyed the fact that I visited them, as this was easier for them and this meant that they did not need to find a babysitter for their children during our appointment. The interviews took place in their living rooms, with two of the participants their child stayed with us in the same room, while the children of the other participants were either at school or asleep. The interviewees tended to get a little distracted when their child

was in the room with us, and this resulted in some hitches in the interview. However, I did try to get back to the conversation, and I do think that we managed to create just as coherent information as in the other interviews. These interrupted interviews took a little longer than the other interviews. Overall, the interviews lasted an hour and fifteen minutes.

Feminist interviewers see the process of interviewing as a “*co-creation of meaning*” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, 132), meaning that the researcher needs to listen intently to the interviewee, and be prepared to drop their agenda and follow the flow of the interview (Hesse-Biber, 2007). As the researcher is recognized to be a co-creator of meaning, the researcher must be reflective on his implications on the research process. This “*reflexivity means taking a critical look inward and reflecting on one’s own lived reality and experiences; this self-reflection or journey can be extremely helpful in the research process*” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, 129). During the research process, I thus tried to reflect on my own positionality.

After evaluating different types of interviews, I decided the semi-structured interview was best suited for the research project. I wanted to find out about the lived experiences of these women of motherhood and its intersections with their religion, as well as calling and sacrifice. I entered the interviews with an agenda, but because I was wanted to create a space in which the participants could openly tell me about their experiences, I wanted to be open to wherever the conversation went. Creating a semi-structured interview setting makes this possible (Hesse-Biber, 2007). An interview guide<sup>3</sup> was prepared in which I had formed questions to use as a guideline during the interview, I was not concerned about the order in which these questions were posed, but I wanted to make sure they were all answered in the interviews. Additionally, when an interviewee told me important new information, I wanted to be able to spend more time on their story, thus, in each interview, new questions were formed according to the direction of the conversation.

### *3.4 The Participants*

The participants in the current research project were gathered via contacts in my network. I had initially started out by contacting several churches in Utrecht and Breda (Breda because I had contacts within that church, and Utrecht because it would be more

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for Interview Guide.

convenient as I live in Utrecht myself) with information about my research project, asking them to contact mothers within their church. However, one of these churches responded negatively to my inquiry, and they would not forward my inquiry to their church members. From the other churches I have never heard back. I had also contacted my Christian friends and requested them to ask around in their families or Christian communities. Soon, my friends had gathered participants for me and these participants also contacted other Christian mothers in their networks. Seven participants were gathered for this research project. According to Ben Beitin (2014), appropriate sample sizes can range from 2 to 12. He argues that it is important to gather enough data to be able to gather thematic redundancy after conducting interviews. After interviewing seven participants, I decided that there was enough thematic overlap in the content of the interviews to start analyzing it. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the results of this sample should not be overgeneralized (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The results apply to the women in their specific contexts.

In selecting the women for this research, I did not use any age criteria, they could be of any age and their children could be of any age. All that was asked of the participants was that their children still required care every day, because I wanted to engage with women who were still in the middle of raising their children and thus navigating between their motherhood and their religion. See Table 1 for more information on the participant's names, their ages, their careers, their number of children, their children's ages and their theological backgrounds.

Table 1. *Overview of participants, their children and their theological background.*

Name	Age	Career	Quantity of children	Age of children <sup>2</sup>	Theological background
Laura	32	Stay-at-home mom	2	5 & 3	Calvinist Reformed <sup>3</sup>
Jasja	30	Orthopedagogue	1	8	Calvinist Reformed <sup>3</sup>
				Months	
Ilze	36	Skin therapist	3	8, 6 & 2	Reformed <sup>4</sup>
Hanneke	29	School social worker	1 <sup>1</sup>	2	Reformed <sup>4</sup>
Lisanne	31	Entrepreneur	1	2	Calvinist Reformed <sup>3</sup>
Stephanie	27	Stay-at-home mom	1 <sup>1</sup>	2½	Evangelical
Jesseke	27	Editor	2	3 & 1½	Calvinist Reformed <sup>3</sup>

*Note: 1 Expecting second child. 2 Age in years unless stated otherwise. 3 CGK (Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk). 4 PKN: (Protestantse Kerken Nederland).*

All the participants are middle-class, white, and in heterosexual relationships, which is probably the result of my own positionality as a middle-class white woman and the network I have built around me. The results of this research do not reflect a great diversity. As these were the women who were brought in contact with me, I was glad to accept them into the research. However, in future research it is important to involve participants from other social positions and identities. It is thus necessary to keep in mind that the current research can generate useful insights in the specific contexts of the women who participated in this study; it informs us on the lived experiences of, white middle-class Christian women in heterosexual relationships within the Netherlands.

All the participants are part of Protestant churches, which is again a result of my positionality. I am a Protestant myself and my network of Christians around me consists of mostly Protestants. Nonetheless, the results of the research can inform us on the lives of Dutch Protestant mothers. In future studies it would perhaps interesting to engage with mothers of different religious backgrounds.

### *3.5 Method of analysis*

After each interview, the conversation was transcribed. First, I set out with underlining recurring themes in the transcriptions by hand, I then created categories in which these themes could be brought together. Thus, the content of the interviews started showing recurring important categories of themes.

However, a software program was then brought to my attention in which I could analyze my qualitative data. I used NVivo 12, in which I added the transcriptions. Within this program, I could create nodes in which text fragments can be gathered. The program thus creates a new Word document in which all text fragments I selected for a node are gathered. Each node focused on one concept, such as motherhood, religion, calling, or self-sacrifice. For example, I thus created a Word document for the node 'calling' in which all fragments where participants talked about calling were gathered. Within this document, it would thus state which participants said what about calling, thus enhancing my understanding of the different ways the participants thought about calling. This is how I could organize the data collected in the interviews.

After organizing the data in this way, I noticed that some new themes seemed to have arisen within the interviews that I had not thought about. Within the 'motherhood' node, I noticed that several participants brought up vulnerability, for

example. I wanted to analyze vulnerability further, and thus I created a new node ‘vulnerability’ and actively selected the fragments in which the participants mentioned this concept. In doing so, I could map out the different ways the participants thought about vulnerability and how they deal with it. This process repeated itself multiple times, until I felt that I had sufficiently organized the content of the interviews.

While sorting the content, I started to try and relate my findings to the theoretical work I had read beforehand. This form of analysis is called grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), in which the researcher is constantly going back and forth between empirical data and their emerging analysis. As I had organized the data, I could start forming an account of vulnerability, for example. I then researched theoretical work on vulnerability in motherhood and related that back to my data. This process of grounded theory ensured me of a better understanding of my data, as well as a better theoretical analysis of it.

## CHAPTER 4: INTERRUPTING THE MATERNAL SILENCE

(Llewellyn, 2016)

During the interviewing process, the participants and I talked about motherhood, religion, calling and self-sacrifice. They provided me with a small insight into the complexity of their lives. In the following section I will be analyzing the content of the interviews. Within this research project I tried to analyze the participants' agency and this will be the first concept that will be used to analyze the interview content.

As noted earlier, an account of agency should always involve fantasy or desires (Bracke, 2008), and during the interviews I noticed that the women talked about their desires and what they find important within their mothering and their spiritual lives quite often. These desires then generated their habitus to achieve this desired state. This is in line with Saba Mahmood's (2001) and Sarah Bracke's (2008) theorizations on agency. In the following section I illustrate what desires or fantasies the women have and how they translate these into their daily practices of mothering and religion. Furthermore, vulnerability strength, calling and self-sacrifice will be discussed, and I will link these to the theoretical basis I have previously discussed.

### *4.1 Desires*

To understand the lives of the participants, it is important to take into consideration their desires, motivations and commitments, which have been formed by their religious background and these can in turn provide us with information about their position as religious women. In the interviews, the participants talked freely about what they find important in their lives. In doing so, I felt that I gained knowledge on their personalities as well as the ways in which they regard their lives.

When talking to the interviewees about their desire to become a mother, the majority knew that motherhood was something they wanted ever since they were children. For Ilze and Laura, this desire developed as they entered a steady relationship with their partners. The women all undertook certain steps to fulfill their desire. Many of them needed to ensure that other factors in their lives had become stable prior to becoming pregnant. This means that before bringing a child into the world, they wanted to have a husband and a stable job. For Hanneke, having a home with a garden and enough space for a child to play in was also crucial. For other women, this wasn't as

important, but all the respondents felt it to be important to be married before having a child. The participants all actively took steps to ensure that they could realize their desire of becoming a mother. In doing so, they show that they were agents in their journey to motherhood.

#### *4.1.1 Desires in upbringing*

The participants also mentioned desires they want to fulfill in the upbringing of their children. Religion plays an important role within upbringing. As religion is important for the mothers themselves, they want to share that with their children. All participants talked about the fact that they felt they are setting an example for their children and that they felt the need to express their faith to their children in the way they live their lives. For Jasja it was still unclear how she would go about this, as she had not been giving it that much thought since her child was just 8 months at the time of the interview. Jesseke felt that if her partner and herself show their children what their religion means to them and how it forms their habits, this will teach their children more than instilling certain religious topics in them. Ilze discussed what part of her religion is most important to her and how she wishes to set an example for her children: “I think that love is the most important part of my religion, especially in this world we live in. I would want to teach my children to respect each other, to take care of each other no matter what (...) so, to me, gossiping is not okay. I also think it’s important to try and understand another person and not judge them on their behavior. That’s what I want to transfer to my children” (Interview Ilze, page 5)<sup>4</sup>.

For Laura the necessity of sharing her religion with her children comes from her understanding of being loved by her God: “I think that as a mother you’re allowed to show your children something of yourself. You’re a child of God, not perfect, but Jesus is on your side. You’re never alone as a mother, so your children should know that they’re never alone either. Because I know I’m a beloved child of God, I think it’s my duty to show my children that they are too” (Interview Laura, 2018, 3). What can also be read in this statement is Laura’s belief that because she believes she isn’t perfect, she teaches her children that it’s okay to make mistakes. Those mistakes will not make them fall out of favor with God. This sentiment was shared by more participants, they reflected that their relation to God offers them feelings of self-worth and they wish for

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<sup>4</sup> Interview transcripts can be obtained by contacting the author.



their children to have that too. In addition to sharing her faith with her son to teach him how loved he is, Stephanie also thought about her son's future and wanted him to become as enthusiastic about her faith as she is: "we also think about the fact that we want him to be prepared to bring people to Jesus. He is going to need to take over some duties from the elderly in the church and I want him to be able to" (Interview Stephanie, page 7). With "bringing people to Jesus" Stephanie means that she wants her son to talk freely about his faith in an enthusiastic manner that will encourage others to turn to the Christian faith as well.

The previous desires formulated by the participants are thus mostly related to their faith and their children, and all their desires seem to focus on the forming of a relationship. The participants want to encourage their children to form a relationship with God, or a loving relationship with themselves. This is in accordance with literature I've read, in which women reportedly rely on relationships and relate their spirituality to caring about and for others (Longman et al., 2011). In my opinion, each desire also seems to be closely linked to the participants' own personhood. Laura, for example, has had some self-esteem issues, and her desire for her children is in turn for them to have high feelings of self-worth. Another example is Stephanie, who enjoys sharing her faith with others and finds it important to teach her son to do the same.

The participants mentioned that sharing their faith with their children can also be accomplished by setting an example of Christian norms to their children. For instance, Stephanie noted that for her this means not using swear words, and in showing her children that she enjoys praying. Laura found it important to show her children how her faith gives her joy, but she was still struggling with finding a way to best express this to her children. But the participants also actively practice their faith with their children. Stephanie mentioned that she brings her son with her to church every Sunday, where she and her husband help in setting everything up for service. This way her son learns about serving the community, "and also that our faith is not just going to church on Sunday and then going back home. And during the weekdays we pray every day before dinner and before going to bed, we always play Christian music" (Interview Stephanie, 2018, 2). Several participants mentioned that they play Christian children's music, which is something that their children enjoy and also teaches them about their religion. Additionally, all participants pray with their children. Laura mentioned that she prays with her children when they are faced with a difficult task, when they hear of something sad on the news, and tries to remind them to be grateful for what they have

during prayer, as they are dependent of God in all that happens to them. She approaches prayer time with her children as a moment where she can be vulnerable and open to them, as well as to God: “I think that sometimes I am not patient enough so I pray for more patience, but also at breakfast I will pray with the children and say ‘we pray for more patience for mommy, yesterday I was not patient enough’ (...) with that I want to show them that you can make mistakes, that doing so does not diminish your worth” (Interview Laura, 2018, 7). This illustrates that the participants see the instances they practice their faith with their children as educative, and that transferring Christian values is of high importance to them. The participants also mentioned that they read the (children’s) Bible with their children. The women all expect that their children will all want to actively engage with their faith when they get older. Laura mentioned that she mostly wants to set an example for her children and is curious to see what religion they will in turn support, or whether they will support any at all. Having children who will not want to engage with Christianity might cause the participants to feel failure, as they see it as their goal to teach their children to follow them in their religion.

#### *4.1.2 Analyzing desires in relation to agency*

When looking at the content of the interviews, what can be understood is that each participant wants to be able to make their children happy, while at the same time wanting to be in touch with their faith and sharing their faith with others. If we look closely at each individual interview, though, it becomes apparent that each participant formulated this desire in a different way. It seems to me that their desires and motivations arise from their theological background, as well as their own personalities and past experiences. Their faith thus touches many aspects of their life and is entwined with the forming of their desires. This is in accordance with Saba Mahmood’s (Mahmood, 2001) work, as she argues that desires and fantasies are formed within the location in which the subject resides.

This account of desire is useful as it improves our understanding of what is important to the participants. As I have pointed out before, an analysis of agency should always incorporate fantasies or desires (Bracke, 2008). I thus want to move on to relate this account to agency. Mahmood (2001) has previously criticized the fact that analyses of agency seldom problematize the universality of the desire to be free from relations of subordination, which has caused agency to be linked to resistance. When we see agency as “a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination

enable and create” (Mahmood, 2001, 203), it becomes clear that it needs to be studied within the grammar of concepts in which it resides. Thus, if we analyze the participant’s capacity for action within their specific contexts, we can better understand the ways they show agency. The participants’ desires are all shaped around the formations of relationships: they want to improve their relationship to God, as well as the relationship of their children with God. To achieve these desires, they perform caring acts such as mothering, or praying together with their children. These acts and desires do not come from a wish to be resistant to structures of domination and could thus be seen as a lack of agency within a liberal framework. However, when analyzing these desires in line with feminist theory on agency (Bracke, 2003; Bracke, 2008; Mahmood, 2001) it becomes apparent that the participants do in fact have a capacity for action. They are taking action, as they are creating practices in their lives that will help them achieve their desires. Thus, the participants succeed in achieving their desires and can be understood as agents within their lives.

#### *4.2 Religious practices*

In the following section I would like to expand on the daily practices the women perform in their lives in order to achieve their desired development within their faith. The participants expressed the fact that they wish to engage with their faith on a regular basis and they found different ways to do so. The variance of ways their faith is expressed is in accordance with lived religion theory (Ammerman, 2014), which explains that lived (daily) religious practices includes ways of eating and dress, how they deal with birth and death, sexuality and nature, or how they modify hair and body through tattoos or dreadlocks. Lived religion practices can also include the spaces people inhabit, and the physical and artistic things people do together such as singing, dancing, and other traditions (190-191). In this way, religious lives can be studied in a more complex manner than simply asking Christians whether they attend church or not. Not all Christians feel welcome at Church, or simply do not see church rituals as the best way to engage with their faith. They may find other ways, such as singing worship songs at home, writing poetry, reading theological books. Even everyday activities such as gardening, walking, or doing domestic work can become the places where people experience the sacred, these acts are thus seen as religious practices (Ammerman, 2014; Aune, 2015).

Not all participants have always been interested in engaging with their faith. Even though they have all been raised in Christian families, religion was a given, not something they actively engaged with on their own. One of the interviewees, Lisanne, told me that she only started to really engage with what her faith meant to her after she moved out of her parental home. This engagement resulted in a search for religious meaning in her life, she had left her home which had always provided her with a group of people to attend church with, and thus needed to provide herself with a new group. Furthermore, part of her family converted to Jehovahism. She then started questioning what her faith meant to her, and which church would be the right fit for her. Finding a partner who was a member of a Reformed Church ended this search for her, as she felt that church was right for her. This search for meaning is something that all interviewees seem to have dealt with. For some of them this involved “church hopping”, exploring different kinds of congregations until they found one that suited them. This negotiation is often done alongside their partner, and they enjoy finding ways to jointly practice their faith. In the interview with Jasja, it became clear that this search for a suitable expression of her and her partner’s faith is still ongoing: “[her partner] likes to make his beliefs practical. Going to church every Sunday does not suit him, he says he would rather help at a foodbank, which he would like to teach our daughter. That doing that work is something you do as a Christian. But singing songs, talking about it, reading about it is more my thing” (Interview Jasja, 2018, 2). Their story thus seems to be an example of the numerous ways in which religion can be lived, as they find other ways to experience the sacred instead of attending church.

All participants see God as a deity they can have a relationship with, which is marked by an unconditional love coming from God. The participants see praying, giving thanks, reading the Bible, and worshipping (singing) as ways that can bring them in contact with God. Hanneke mentioned that she tries to take a moment each day to read the Bible or pray each day in silence. Several interviewees also mentioned that they enjoy reading theological books in which certain biblical themes or stories are analyzed, which they feel can help them getting closer to God, as it will enhance their understanding of his Word (the Bible). Some of the participants talked about their faith as marked by wonderment, as they are continually amazed by God’s creation. These feelings of wonderment are then daily communicated to God by prayer and giving thanks.

The participants also expressed their need to turn their knowledge and their enthusiasm for their faith into practical acts to try and improve society. Jesseke mentioned that she actively seeks ways to make her religion practical and told me she tries to decide for herself what it means to be a Christian from a day to day basis. She listens to podcasts and reads about current global issues from a Christian perspective. “Like being a vegetarian, I’m not just doing that because it’s better for the environment, but also because I feel that Christians should be at the front of that movement, why aren’t we?” (Interview Jesseke, 2018, 2). This navigating the secular world while having Christian beliefs is something that many of the respondents think about, and is in line with lived religion theory, in which believers try to take every day secular life into religious practices (Ammerman, 2014). The interviewees also talked about how they try to find ways to express their being religious to other people. Jasja, for example, mentioned that she tries to be more patient and friendlier than she might feel like at times, as she thinks that those traits will please God.

Another religious practice the participants talked about was seeking God’s will for their lives. This became especially pronounced in my conversation with Stephanie. In a journey of slowly trusting more on her God, she can now confidently say “[God has] never let us down before and will not start doing that now” (Interview Stephanie, 2018, 3). In difficult periods, such as finding a new home while also being 6 weeks away from giving birth to her second child, she felt peaceful and knew that things would eventually fall into place. Her family prays often and tries to find ways in which they feel they are following God’s will for their lives. This leads me to the following section, in which I will analyze the ways in which the women talk about listening to God’s will and thus being able to pursue their calling.

#### *4.2.1 Thinking about goals in life*

Calling can be understood as a direction in life one wants to follow, which God has placed in their heart (Longman et al., 2011). According to research, once a person engages in self-reflection, prayer, and meditation, they will be able to discern God’s calling for their personal talents (Longman et al., 2011). When answering to a calling, Christians believe they are serving God by helping humanity (Longman et al., 2011; Scott, 2002; Swezey, 2009). In previous literature, calling is sometimes described as a career direction people pursue, but others analyze it as a lifestyle (Longman et al.,

2011). I sought to engage with the participants on this topic in an open manner and asked them how they define calling.

The participants mentioned that calling could entail very diverse goals, such as a career path to follow, perfecting a specific talent, or being kind to others. Marriage and motherhood thus were not automatically a woman's calling. The participants did not see calling as a pre-set destination they must reach. As Jasja said, that would not leave any choice for her, and she does feel the liberty to choose which path to follow. This account is like the accounts of women who saw calling as general in the research conducted by Longman et al. (2011). They see it as a state of mind, God provides them with an opportunity and it is up to them to choose how to deal with it. Many of the participants felt this way about calling, Hanneke, for example, mentioned: "Yes we do pray that God will lead us to where He wants us to go... But I also don't think everyone receives a specific goal, I think if you do something you love and in which you can use your talents, that can also be a way to serve God. You can do anything to serve God" (Interview Hanneke, 2018, 5). As Hanneke notes here, small every day practices can become acts of serving God, which leads me to connect calling with lived religion theory. As lived religion theory states that believers can experience the sacred in many aspects of life, pursuing a calling for the betterment of humanity can lead believers to feel closer to God (Swezey, 2009) and thus experience the sacred. The other participants seem to confirm this link, as they mentioned they wanted to unlink calling from the idea of doing 'big' things to serve God, such as leaving everything behind to preach the gospel somewhere. In that way, being kind to others or caring for others can also be a calling, and the participants felt that they could relate to that. Pursuing their calling can thus make it possible for the participants to turn their faith into practical actions.

What we can also read in Hanneke's account is that personal talents can influence one's calling. The other participants echoed this and mentioned seeing people as having multiple talents and motivations given to them by God. Jasja mentioned that people develop these talents by actively working on them, but she also saw this development as dependent on upbringing and the specific environment in which a person is placed. Hanneke's and Jasja's statements thus seem to point out that a person's specific talents will influence which calling they will pursue, while these talents are in turn influenced by a person's surroundings. In previous literature (Longman et al., 2011), contextual factors in which talents can be developed and put to use are named, which can enable a person to pursue their calling. The accounts of Jasja

and Hanneke, however, seem to open another way of looking at calling, as talents do not only enable a person to pursue their calling, but can form their calling as well. If people have multiple talents, perhaps there are multiple possible callings for them, is what Jesseke noted. She is now doing a job that she loves in media, but maybe she would also be very suited to work in healthcare. Seeing a range of possibilities in calling seems to leave more space for the complexities in talents that people have. The idea of multiple possible callings seems again to open the conceptualization of calling posed by Longman et al. (2011). They conceptualized that the awareness of calling can be enlarged or constrained based on influences such as the individual's life circumstances, cultural expectations, theological influences, and family realities. They do not mention the possibility of multiple callings. I find it an interesting idea, as it seems to me that this puts more freedom of choice to the individual, as their development and choices will cause them to pursue one calling or the other.

Some participants mentioned that they see calling as open to change. Stephanie, for example, mentioned that her partner and herself have been a part of the City Life Church (CLC) and have helped in the founding of the church. She mentioned that perhaps their temporary calling had been to transfer the knowledge they had gained in their previous congregation: "so yes, I do think it can change, and I also think that it is really important to live life in dependency of God. If we leave the CLC, that's okay, if that is something He wants then we will. So, I do think God has a calling for you, but that it can change. And I think that is a result of the places God puts you in" (Interview Stephanie, 2018, 5). According to Stephanie, God can put individuals in certain surroundings which will then influence or change their calling. In my opinion, this could further expand the conceptualization of calling (Longman et al., 2011). They pose that the factors which influence the awareness of calling can change, but perhaps we need to see calling as more dynamic as well. If a person has multiple callings or a changing calling, their environment may change, they might start to use different talents, which will get more finetuned and in turn change the participant's sense of self. Their changed sense of self might then cause the individual to gain a better sense of their new calling. The model posed by Longman et al. (2011), could thus perhaps be influenced by calling itself and become more dynamic. It thus seems to me that in a new model of calling, calling can be seen as influenced by surroundings, talents, sense of self while at the same time calling itself will be influencing all these factors.

As the participants mentioned the possibility of multiple callings, I asked them whether they consider motherhood as a calling. Most were unsure. They reflected on women who do not want to have children and reflected that these women might not be suited to become mothers. Jesseke also reflected on her own mother, who had become a housewife and who loved doing that. She noted that her mother's children and grandchildren react to her in a very positive way, so Jesseke does think her mother's calling is motherhood. When I asked Ilze whether she would see motherhood as calling, she responded that the idea was new to her: "I put in 100% of myself and I never get tired of it. So, yes, maybe it is my calling? I used to think that I wasn't really good at anything, but I am good at mothering" (Interview Ilze, 2018, 3). None of the respondents, however, see motherhood as a goal for a woman's life. Lisanne wondered what that would mean for women who are unable to conceive. Seeing how much pain this causes these women, Lisanne felt that it would be strange to say this is God's plan. Laura said that she does not see motherhood as her calling, but now that she has children it has become her new goal to make sure that these children grow up in a warm, loving home. It seems that motherhood could be a calling, but the participants seemed hesitant in referring to it that way, as they felt it would create an incentive for those seeing motherhood as a "goal" of women's lives and thus silencing those who cannot conceive.

I was interested in the participants' ideas about calling, because within Dawn Llewellyn's work (2016), British Christian women did not want to have children as, according to them, it would interfere with their spiritual calling. Llewellyn's work with women who have largely been silenced by society was valuable, and I wish to expand on her work by turning the lens to Christian women who have become mothers. Doing so will enhance our understanding of calling, as well as the ways in which Dutch mothers negotiate between their faith and motherhood practices. Analyzing calling within this research has led me to believe that motherhood can influence one's ability to be aware of and pursue their calling, but this influence can be either positive or negative. This is based on the work conducted by Longman et al. (2011), in which life circumstances and family realities have been named as influencers on awareness of and ability to pursue calling. However, I think it might be useful to look at calling in a more dynamic way. Perhaps a woman's calling can change, and perhaps motherhood can be one of the factors to change someone's calling. The participants expressed that God can place them in specific environments which could temporarily provide a calling, but at the same time they felt that they are able to choose which path to follow. I want to draw



a link here between calling and Sarah Bracke's (2008) example of submission. Bracke's participant Yasemin has a desire to submit to God, which produces a relative autonomy within her social environment. That relative autonomy would be seen as agency within secular liberal frameworks, while at the same time those frameworks would see her submission as a lack of agency. Though different, calling could be read as a lack of autonomy within secular liberal frameworks, since the believer will try to follow a path which has been decided for them. The believer will thus submit to God's will. However, as the participants mentioned, they feel a certain freedom, and when we see calling as dynamic, we can see that there is agency in pursuing a calling. We need to see calling within the grammar in which it resides and can then actually see that the participants perform agency here.

#### *4.3 Vulnerability and strength*

A theme that arose during the interviews was how motherhood has changed the participants. Ilze mentioned that since becoming a mother going out with friends is not important to her anymore, she said that she's become "a lioness" (Interview Ilze, 2018, 1) for her family, she will do anything for them and other things do not matter as much anymore. Jasja, on the other hand, noted that she has gotten to know herself better ever since she became a mother. She found out that she had set hard demands for herself and for others. Regarding taking care of her baby, she felt it was important to prepare fresh food every day and she had scoffed at others who had suggested that she could buy a jar of baby food, but as her daughter got older and Jasja had more stressful events going on, she noticed that it was impossible to meet her own demands. She feels that motherhood is still changing her and she is still unlearning setting high standards for herself and others "I think that is a good thing, that it makes me a nicer person. Otherwise you become so untouchable, like 'look at her, she's so perfect'. It makes you untouchable. It creates a distance, maybe it also makes you inhuman. But that brokenness... sometimes things don't work, and everyone is just trying their best. I think many others recognize that" (Interview Jasja, 2018, 2). The process of learning more about oneself within motherhood was shared by several participants.

One of the ways in which the mothers mentioned they have changed is in becoming more careful. They worry about their child's safety, and "see danger around every corner". Ilze noted that she used to be carefree, but now that she has children she is very careful and worries more often. She thinks this is a healthy change, as she feels

it makes her softer as a person. Hanneke recognized these worries and noted: “it makes you very vulnerable. People often say so, but now I have experienced it myself. If something were to happen to my daughter... Even though I am usually very down-to-earth, now I am worrying about dangers. That’s how deep your feelings for your child go” (Interview Hanneke, 2018, 3).

Worrying about their children’s safety is very common amongst all parents, though the severity and likeliness that these worries will come true differ across race, class, gender, age and ethnicity (Elliott & Aseltine, 2012). Consequently, parents deal with these risks and worries according to their own social positionality as well. In the interviews, it became apparent that the participants deal with their worries through their religious beliefs. Jesseke noted that she prays for her children’s safety and metaphorically places them in God’s hands. “That gives me more peace, to think that I’m not the only one taking care of them. Praying for them grants me more of a chill mode” (Interview Jesseke, 2018, 2). The other participants mentioned that they share the responsibilities of taking care of their child with God, and that this gives them strength. Hanneke mentioned: “my faith gives me the knowledge within motherhood that, even though we can try our best as parents, we’re always depending on God and we’re not solely responsible for her” (Interview Hanneke, 2018, 3).

Though worrying about their children’s safety is a common occurrence for all parents, including non-religious ones, the participants found ways to relieve themselves of these worries within their faith. They can pray for those worries, which usually results in a sense of relief because they believe that God will then be taking care of their children in response to their prayer. However, the participants also experience their faith in the midst of those worries. For Hanneke, the deep protective feelings she has for her daughter reflect the love God must have for herself, as she is God’s child as well. Being a religious mother can thus help the participants alleviate their fears, while at the same time learning to appreciate God’s love for themselves. In my opinion, this marks another way in which lived religion theory can be related to the participants’ accounts, even within their fears and worries, they are able to experience the sacred and come closer to God.

#### *4.4 Thinking about not always having to 'be a mother'*

What is noticeable in this analysis is that the participants and I talked about motherhood and the way they wish to raise their children for the larger part of the interviews. However, many of the participants noted that they felt it was important to engage with activities for themselves, to sometimes feel like they “don’t have to be a mother all the time” (Interview Lisanne, 2018, 5). Needing time for oneself seems natural, but for many of the participants this felt as though they were failing as mothers, as if they did not love their children enough. Jasja echoed these feelings, however staying at home and focusing solely on her child and overanalyzing her every move, did not make Jasja happy either. When returning to work and taking more initiative in her social life, she noticed that she became happier. She noticed that she enjoys not having to be a mother all the time. It taught her that her daughter can manage without her being there all the time, which gives Jasja the freedom to engage in other activities. This is a sentiment that other respondents mentioned as well. Hanneke mentioned that returning to work opened “her world” to other things than taking care of her daughter. The participants mentioned that work or being able to have hobbies brought balance in their lives. Many of them go out for lunch with friends, Laura also mentioned that she enjoys going for a walk and having a cup of tea somewhere. Lisanne, on the other hand has started a business in selling handmade baby items which gives her a sense of fulfillment.

The mothers thus seem to have to navigate between cultural representations of good motherhood, which are also spread within secular frameworks (Baker, 2009; Miller-McLemore, 1999), while at the same time also needing the time to engage with their own interests. Another complex negotiation is that of being a partner and not ‘just a mother’ at home. The participants noted that their relationship with their partner had changed significantly after having children, as their time at home became more devoted to their children. Often conversations with their partner center around their children. This is not necessarily a problem, Hanneke noted that she sees her husband and herself as the fan club of their daughter: “we think everything she does is amazing and there is no one else who loves talking about her as much as my partner and me. The only danger is that we only talk about our day with our daughter, and not about other things” (Hanneke, 2018, 6). This was echoed by the other respondents, they noted that they value spending time with their partners while not talking about their children. To do so, they need to guard themselves from talking about their children too much.

Several of the participants mentioned that they find it important to plan a “date night” with their partner to reconnect. Going out for dinner or other activities together cannot be done spontaneously anymore, but the participants felt that having to plan this brings new challenges for their relationship which they enjoy tackling. The participants mentioned that these date nights consist of, for example, going out for dinner, drinks or bowling together. Of course, making time for each other does not necessarily entail going out, as Stephanie mentioned, her partner and herself enjoy staying at home together and chat over coffee. Other participants echoed this feeling, but they all stated that they value spending time together as a couple instead of as ‘parents’.

While talking about their relationship with their partners, I asked the participants how they divided household tasks between themselves and their partners. They noted that most of them do most of the housework, which is often a consequence of their spouse having a full-time job which pays more than the participant’s job. They also noted that their partners find it easy to continue doing their hobbies. When their partners are asked to go out for a night, most of them can say yes right away, while the respondents often negotiate whether they can go out first. They are critical of the fact that men are more able to live their own life, which can sometimes lead to tensions between them and their partners. But on the other hand, many of the respondents told me they feel “their time will come again when their children are older” (Interview Lianne, 2018, 7). They do not mind having to stay at home more often than their partners.

What can be read in these accounts is that the participants need to sacrifice some of their time and the ability to spontaneously do something. However, when I asked them if they felt motherhood had brought self-sacrifice into their lives, they seemed hesitant at naming it a sacrifice. As Stephanie put it: “if it is a sacrifice, then it sounds as if you don’t like being a mother” (Interview Stephanie, 2018, 6). She did however recognize that being a mother can be hard, and she mentioned she can find new joy in motherhood by getting closer to God. I think what Stephanie mentioned about sacrifice illustrates what has been culturally represented as a good mother, seeing motherhood as a sacrifice must mean that these women do not enjoy being a mother. Yet, the other participants did mention that they have struggled with self-sacrifice when they became a mother, in terms of giving up time for themselves and having to find new ways to engage with their hobbies. This leads me to try and reframe self-sacrifice. Often, when talking about self-sacrifice, these acts are framed as oppressive, those who

have to self-sacrifice lack autonomy. However, I want to suggest here, once again drawing on Sarah Bracke's (2008) work on submission and agency, that these women do perform agency in their self-sacrifice. The participants give up their time to their children, while at the same time rejoicing in caring for their children. Giving care to their children grants them the opportunity to achieve their desires and goals. I will try to elaborate on this argument in the following section.

In the interviews, I noticed that many of the participants mentioned phrases such as "my time will come", when talking about having to stay at home more often for their children. Yet, at the same time, these women were hesitant to call this a sacrifice. I then suggested that self-sacrifice does not necessarily have to be a bad thing, and this seemed to grant a more in-depth discussion about the self-sacrifices that come along with motherhood. Lisanne mentioned while being pregnant with her daughter, she had prepared for the fact that she would be giving up a lot in her life: "you just can't do everything anymore. But that is okay, she comes first, and I will adjust to her" (Interview Lisanne, 2018, 2). For Hanneke, being able to put her own interests aside for her daughter was something that reassured her. She had been worrying about this before she became a mother. "So I can put someone else first. I find that really beautiful and also link that to my faith. It just happens so naturally that it must have been created that way by God" (Interview Hanneke, 2018, 4).

When I link these accounts to the theoretical background I've found on self-sacrifice, I come to the conclusion that the participants are performing self-donation as a form of sacrifice: they are donating their time and their love, and thus endorsing their own value by making a gift of themselves and seeing themselves as worthy of being gifted (Cawston & Archer, 2018). In self-donation we can again see agency of the participants, as they hold on to their autonomy, while at the same time achieving their goals of caring for their child. However, this self-donation must be accompanied by also caring for oneself, as Ruth Groenhout poses (2003). The participants echoed this, Jasja mentioned that she had to learn not to sacrifice herself completely, she had to learn to take more time for herself. Laura beautifully mentioned the need to set boundaries on her self-sacrifice. She wants to teach her children that she has needs of her own and that it is okay to ask for them to be met. "That means that we take care of each other as a family. That children deserve all love and care, but that father and mother are not less important, and you should show them that you're important too and that it is okay to take good care of yourself" (Interview Laura, 2018, 8). Laura's statement comes from

her understanding of being a child of God, which illustrates Ruth Groenhout's (2003) ideas about self-sacrifice. All humans are created by God as his loving children, and thus everyone deserves the same amounts of self-care and care received from others.

According to the accounts of the participants, motherhood thus does come with self-sacrifice. I have argued that we need to reframe self-sacrifice as an agential move. The participants retain their autonomy and find joy in giving care to their children and achieve their desires in sharing their faith with children, in centering God in their lives and find ways to pursue their own professional goals. I think the current research thus echoes the necessity, mentioned by Sarah Bracke (2003, 2008) and Saba Mahmood (2001), to explore the meaning of agency within the grammar of concepts in which it resides; in this case the self-sacrifice of Christian Dutch women. When analyzing self-sacrifice in this manner, space can be created for mothers with stories about self-sacrifice and the hardships of motherhood.

#### *4.5 Conclusion*

Within this chapter, I provided an account of the interview content. The research is in line with previous work conducted by Saba Mahmood (2001) and Sarah Bracke (2003; 2008), in which they argue that an account of agency should always involve desires. The participants' desires are born out of their specific location as white, Dutch Christian women and they have shown that they are agents within their lives, meaning that they have a capacity for action to achieve their desires. Furthermore, the participants provided an account of their daily religious practices, which teach us that each of them finds a way to practice their faith according to their own interests and personhood. The participants have also shown that they can experience the sacred within the hardships of their lives, in the midst of their worries they turn to God.

The research also opens up the floor to new definitions of calling and self-sacrifice. Calling can perhaps be seen as an inter-dynamic model, in which calling can be influenced by one's surroundings, talents and one's sense of self. Yet, at the same time calling is also influencing these surroundings, talents and sense of self, as it will make the person pursuing their calling enter new situations, develop their talents and thus enhancing a new sense of self. The participants also mentioned the possibility of having multiple callings, which are related to the many talents of each individual. The accounts of the participants show that they are agents even within pursuing their calling. At the same time, the participants' accounts urge us to rethink self-sacrifice, as they see

self-sacrifice as positive, as a blessing. Framing self-sacrifice within the context of the participants illustrates that self-sacrifice can be a way to practice their religious beliefs. At the same time, the participants show that they are agents within self-sacrifice. They find ways to do so according to their own desires, while at the same time they are finding ways to self-care. The current research thus shows that involving the lived experiences of Dutch religious women can provide useful new insights in calling and self-sacrifice.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I aimed to interrupt the maternal silence (as posed by Dawn Llewellyn (2016)) by amplifying the voices of Dutch Christian mothers. I started out with providing a short overview of the history of religion within the Netherlands, by doing so I could provide the reader with more information on the context of the participants. I then moved on to point out that the current research answers to previously formulated critique on the separation between religion and feminist theory. The current research was a needed intervention, as it connected feminist theory to religious women and in doing so provided new insights into the ways Dutch Christian women experience motherhood and their faith. It thus provided insights into the complexity of the lives of Dutch Christian mothers. Within the second chapter I argued that useful concepts to analyze the views of the participants were agency, calling, and self-sacrifice. The third chapter tackled the methodology of the current research, I argued that this thesis is based on standpoint epistemology as it uses the voices of Dutch Christian women to “start off thought” (Harding, 1993, 50). I then argued that my position as a woman who is white, Christian, and Dutch has influenced the research process and provided two specific instances in which I noticed that my personal opinions were influencing the interview process. I then moved on to provide more information on the participants, on feminist ways to conduct interviews, and the methods of analysis used in the research. Important to note is that the participants of the research were all Protestant, cisgendered women, white, in heteroromantic relationships and middle-class. The results of the research can thus not be generalized, but they do provide us with important insights into the lives of the women in this specific context, as well as provide us with starting points to further analyze calling, self-sacrifice, agency, motherhood and religion with a more diverse sample.

As Saba Mahmood (2001) poses, an account of agency should always include desire. These have been formed within the specific context in which the object resides. In this research, the participants showed that their desires were for their children to be happy, as well as to get closer to God themselves. They wanted to improve their relationship with God, and at the same time wanted to be a motivating factor for their children to improve their relationship with God. At the same time, the participants mentioned desires that seemed to be related to their own characteristics. Their personality and familial situation, as well as their theological background have thus



shaped their desires. The women take steps in their daily lives to achieve these desires. The participants thus show that they have a capacity for action within their social location, they are able to be agents in the way they fulfill those desires.

The research tried to map out the participants' religious practices, proving that religion analyzed through lived religion theory provides a much more complex understanding of the lived experiences of these women. Religion should be viewed as dynamic, the participants developed within their faith. They developed their attunement to God and their own ways to get into contact with God. Often, when religion is researched, people are asked whether they attend church or not and their attendance will then be used as a measurement for how religious they are (Ammerman, 2014; Aune, 2015). However, the participants mentioned not all of them enjoy going to church, while at the same time engaging with religious practices in their everyday lives. It would not be fair to not call them religious. According to lived religion theory, these every day acts are in fact ways to experience the sacred.

The participants also thought about how to live according to God's will for their lives. Their account of calling encouraged me to try and find a new way to define calling. The participants mentioned the possibility of multiple callings, or temporary callings. They believe that people have multiple talents and it thus seems that there should be multiple callings according to those talents. At the same time, they believe that God can place them in specific environments, which could turn out to provide them with a temporary calling. Therefore, I argue that calling should be viewed as dynamic, just as religion. People develop themselves and their talents, which can bring them into new surroundings, which then in turn might influence their calling. At the same time, pursuing a new calling might bring people to new surroundings as well, keeping this dynamic cycle going.

Another point raised by the participants is the fact that they all enjoy doing things for their own interest, such as engaging with their hobbies, which has led them to fear whether they were bad mothers. When I tried to engage them in talking about self-sacrifice, we noticed that a reframing of self-sacrifice was needed. According to previous research, self-donation is a form of sacrifice in which the person sacrificing themselves does not lose their autonomy. This seems to be the case in motherhood, because mothers offer up their time to care for their children. At the same time, I deemed it necessary to engage with sacrifice within a religious grammar, as the participants are all religious. In Ruth Groenhout's ideas of Christian care, self-sacrifice

is equally performed with self-care since all humans are equally worthy as they are all created by God. This was echoed by the participants, they all narrated the need for self-care, while at the same time enjoying giving care to their children.

The common thread of this research is my search for the meaning of agency within the specific grammars of these participants. I have related it to their desires, but I have also argued that within calling and self-sacrifice agency can be read. Though in secular frameworks calling and self-sacrifice are usually seen as a lack of autonomy, the accounts of these women contradict this view. They perform these acts in ways that suit them, in ways that enable them to fulfill their own desires. As I have mentioned earlier, Bracke's (2008) example of submission, which can provide religious agents with relative autonomy, while at the same time being read as oppressive within secular frameworks served as a way for me to connect calling and self-sacrifice to agency. If we analyze calling and self-sacrifice within the grammar of the participants, we can see that the participants use it to achieve their desires and gain more autonomy.

Bringing feminist theory and religiosity together has thus proven to bring forth useful new insights into the workings of calling, self-sacrifice, and agency in the lives of Dutch Christian women. It has allowed me to analyze the accounts of the participants without pushing secular frameworks on their wordings, instead, I have aimed to analyze their accounts within their own grammars. Though the participants formed a homogeneous group, their accounts of motherhood and faith were very varied, and thus helped me in thoroughly engaging with the concepts of agency, calling, and self-sacrifice. However, there are different ways of being a mother, and the different intersections of one's identity categories will provide them with distinct experiences of motherhood and faith. It is therefore important to engage with a more diverse group of participants in future research. Doing so will lead to new opportunities of interrupting the maternal silence (Llewellyn, 2016) by generating important and varied accounts of motherhood and faith. Stories of the hardships and joys of motherhood deserve to be heard, as they will lead to enhanced understanding of the complexities of mothers' lives. In addition, having access to more diverse accounts of motherhood and faith can perhaps be a source of support to religious mothers, as they can see that they are not alone in their joys and sorrows. After all, mothers do know best. It's time to further interrupt the maternal silence.

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## APPENDIX

### *Interview Guide*

Things to ask before start of actual in-depth interview:

- Age
- Age children
- Marital status
- Employed yes or no? What kind of job?

Also important to note before starting the interview:

1. Ok to voice record?
2. Use of pseudonyms wanted?
3. Always ok to not answer a question or to stop the interview.

Topics that should be covered:

#### Motherhood

1. What made you decide to become a mother? (Hoe kwam je tot de keus moeder te worden?)
2. How did you prepare yourself for motherhood? (Hoe heb je je voorbereid op het moeder worden?)
3. How do you experience motherhood? (Hoe ervaar je het om moeder te zijn?)
4. Do you experience difficulties? (Zijn er dingen waar je tegen aan loopt?)
5. Is motherhood different from what you expected? (Is het anders dan je had verwacht?)
6. What does your environment think of motherhood? How do you feel about that? (Hoe kijkt je omgeving tegen moeders aan, wat vind je daarvan?)
7. What is important to you in the way you mother? (Wat vindt je belangrijk in jouw moederschap?)

#### Religion

1. How is your faith integrated into your everyday life? (Hoe is je geloof geïntegreerd in je dagelijks leven?)
2. How important is your faith to you? (Hoe belangrijk is je geloof voor jou?)

#### Motherhood & religion

1. Do you want to convey your faith in the upbringing of your child? How do you do this? (Wil je het geloof mee geven in de opvoeding? Hoe doe je dat?)
2. How does your faith influence motherhood? (Hoe beïnvloedt jouw geloof je moederschap?)
3. Can your faith provide strength as a mother? How? (Kan jouw geloof je rol als moeder versterken? Hoe?)
4. Did your religion provide support when you were preparing for motherhood? Did the Church? (Kon je bij het voorbereiden op moeder zijn ook iets halen uit je geloof? Uit de kerk?)
5. How do you experience being a mother? (Hoe ervaar je het om een christelijke moeder te zijn?)
6. Do you think it's different being a Christian mother than a mother with another life view? Why (not)? (Denk je dat het anders is om christelijke moeder te zijn dan een moeder met een andere levensovertuiging? Waarom wel of niet?)
7. Do you have any role models that inspire you? (Zijn er rolmodellen voor jou waar je inspiratie uit haalt?)

8. How did your mother negotiate motherhood and her faith? What do you think about that? (Hoe ging jouw moeder om met geloof en moederschap? Wat vindt je daarvan?)

Calling

1. What do you think about calling? (Hoe denk jij over ‘roeping’?)
2. Do you see motherhood as calling? (Zie je moederschap als roeping?)
3. Could you have multiple callings as a woman? (Zou je als vrouw meerdere roepingen kunnen hebben?)
4. What do you think when you hear people saying that a woman’s calling is motherhood? (Wat vindt je ervan als gezegd wordt dat de roeping van een vrouw het moeder zijn is?)

Sacrifice

1. What is the division of tasks like at home? What do you think about that? Is that different than expected beforehand? (Hoe is de taakverdeling thuis? Wat vind je daarvan? Is dat anders gegaan dan verwacht?)
2. What do you think about self-sacrifice in relation to motherhood? (Hoe denk jij over opoffering in verband met moederschap?)