

2016 Religion and Diversity Project Workshop Grant Report

Title: When Prayers are not Enough: Religion, Gender and Family Violence

Dates: September 13-14, 2016

Location: The Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB

Catherine Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clark are members of Strand 3 on Sexuality and Gender. The work of Strand 3 is to explore the ways in which gender and religion intersect that attracts public, legal and policy attention. Cathy and Nancy have collaborated on research on religion and family violence for a number of years. The issue of violence within religious families has attracted considerable public attention in recent years in Canada due to some high profile legal cases, in particular the Shafia family murder trial and the dispute concerning the use of religious law in family arbitration cases in Ontario. It was also alluded to in the 2015 federal election campaign when the Conservatives proposed to set up a “barbaric cultural practices” hotline to protect women and girls. The public rhetoric concerning family violence usually focuses on immigrant or visible minority families – many of whom belong to the growing non-Christian religious groups in the country, especially Muslims. This workshop was designed to address some of these issues by bringing together scholars from diverse disciplinary perspectives working on various topics located at the intersection of gender, religion and family violence.

Pascale Fournier, also a member of Strand 3 and Research Chair in Legal Pluralism and Comparative Law at the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa agreed to be the keynote speaker for the workshop. The call for papers was issued at the beginning of February 2016 and disseminated widely amongst our scholarly networks. Eleven abstracts were submitted and accepted under the condition that the authors agreed to submit drafts of their papers about a month prior to the workshop. Six of these papers were from graduate students. Traci West, Professor of Ethics and African American Studies at Drew University Theological School in New York also accepted an invitation to take part in the workshop. Three students (two graduate and one undergraduate) were invited to attend the workshop as observers and three people were invited as commentators, Lois Mitchell from the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches, and Aamir Jamal and Sue McKenzie Mohr from the St. Thomas University School of Social Work.

The keynote address was scheduled for the evening prior to the one day workshop, open to the public and widely promoted. Over 80 people attended the event representing a diverse range of constituencies in the university and broader community. Simultaneous translation was available. Greetings were brought by Jocelyne Roy Vienneau, Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick and David Burns, the Vice President of Research at UNB. Nancy introduced Pascale whose lecture was titled: “Earthly States, holy matrimony: Response of secular governments to family violence and religion.” Pascale examined the intersection of religious and civil law that occurs at the time of divorce for Muslim and Jewish women in Germany, France, the UK, and Canada based on qualitative interviews with women. She presented a cost/benefit analysis for women attempting

to divorce in the religious and secular spheres, and reported women found significant advantages and disadvantages in both. Pascale called for improved religious education for members of the justice system, arguing that pluralism in law is not merely an accommodation of religious beliefs, but is a reflection of a judicial reality. She proposed that greater religious education could allow religious women and their lawyers to make better use of the civil legal systems and creatively work around roadblocks to female-led divorce within religious law. There were lots of questions from the audience and active engagement from some of the undergraduate students in attendance.

The one day workshop featured eleven paper presentations from the disciplines of law, sociology and theology and covering family violence issues within Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Aboriginal groups, African American communities and New Religious Movements. The workshop participants had received and reviewed the papers prior to their arrival in Fredericton and were encouraged to point out similarities and differences between the presentations in their comments. The first session included two French presentations and simultaneous translation was available for the largely Anglophone group. The final session of the day included a virtual presentation by Strand 3 member Susan Palmer using webinar technology. In her observation report, graduate student Emma Robinson identified several themes amongst the presentations including the call to work within prescribed religious/community roles when addressing family violence, the theme of community insularity and intersectionality, and the need for greater religious and spiritual education and accommodation at multiple levels of the response to family violence. At the end of the day, the workshop participants agreed to contribute revisions of their papers to a proposed publication by Brill to be edited by Cathy and Nancy. They were invited to submit a list of points explaining how their work compared with other papers discussed during the day. It was noted that one theme that arose several times during the day's discussions was the shadow that history throws on particular contemporary issues related to family violence that face marginalized groups including the history of colonialism, racism, sexism and homophobia. Cathy has submitted a formal proposal to Brill which is currently under consideration.

Informal feedback from those who attended the public keynote presentation and the workshop participants has been very positive. This was the first opportunity for an academic paper presentation for one of the graduate students. The commentators made valuable contributions to the discussions and found the workshop helpful to their own scholarly and activist work. There is tremendous enthusiasm amongst the workshop participants for contributing to the publication. Students who observed the workshop found it interesting and according to one graduate student, "this workshop . . . helped me narrow down my own research interests, and view the field through a more nuanced lens."

Submitted by Cathy Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clark
14 October 2016