Christian Academic Motherhood in Secular Higher Education: The Experiences of One Evangelical Christian

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Although some scholars have highlighted the challenges faced by academic mothers in secular higher education and others have investigated those of Christian academic mothers in Christian higher education, none have looked at the experiences of Christian academic mothers in secular higher education. This autoethnographic study was conducted to analyze and to interpret 1 evangelical Christian’s experiences as a new academic mother at a secular university. The results of this study suggest that religious academic mothers working in secular higher education might benefit from drawing on religious-based strategies for dealing with the unique challenges that they face in their pursuit of fulfilling their dual calling to both career and motherhood.

KEYWORDS academic motherhood, Christian, higher education, religion

Higher education has been described as a “greedy” institution\textsuperscript{1} in that academic work demands total commitment from its faculty. The ideal faculty member is married to her work, can move at will, and works long hours to earn tenure.\textsuperscript{2} Motherhood has also been described as “greedy” as a result of the same need for total commitment.\textsuperscript{3} It makes sense, then, that when mothers, especially those with young children living at home, also work as full-time faculty members in higher education, they experience challenges

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with regard to fulfilling both roles. The purpose of this article is to present the results of an autoethnographic study about one evangelical Christian academic mother’s (Christy’s) transition back to full-time work in the secular academy after giving birth to her first child (Levi).

**ACADEMIC MOTHERHOOD IN SECULAR HIGHER EDUCATION**

A number of researchers have documented many of the challenges of academic mothers in secular higher education. Because of the never-ending academic workload, research suggests that academic mothers working in these contexts often need to learn to “satisfice” in their academic work, accepting that their work is “good enough” rather than striving to be the best teacher, researcher, and university citizen. For academic mothers who have not yet earned tenure, the pressure to publish makes the practice of satisficing difficult to embrace, in that they hesitate to sacrifice either the quantity or quality of their research for fear that doing so might result in their being denied tenure. Research also suggests that, on the home front, these academic mothers are usually responsible for the “second shift;” they typically devote more time to childcare and housework than do their spouses or partners. Those additional responsibilities at home only add to the chaotic lifestyle reported by many academic mothers in secular higher education.

Many secular higher education institutions have attempted to put new policies and institutional support mechanisms into place to help academic parents manage both work and family responsibilities. For instance, in a study conducted in 2004, researchers found that 79% of secular research universities offered institution-wide tenure stop-clock policies, and 52% provided unpaid leaves. However, problems still remain with regard to making conditions conducive to success for academic mothers in secular higher education. One of the primary concerns expressed by many academic mothers is the fear of becoming “mommy-tracked” if they choose to use the policies and institutional support mechanisms available to them. Interestingly, some female academics in secular higher education never even become mothers; they choose not to have children at all, perceiving that academic work and family life are incompatible. As a result of these and other challenges faced by many academic mothers in secular higher education, many report ongoing struggles with stress and guilt.

**ACADEMIC MOTHERHOOD IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The experience of academic motherhood among Christian women in Christian higher education has also received attention among some research scholars. Many Christian academic mothers in Christian higher education have reported similar stressors to those reported by academic mothers in
secular higher education. For instance, many Christian academic mothers who work in Christian higher education not only bear the responsibility for the “second shift,” just as those in secular higher education, but they also do most of the “mental labor” at home. Such mental labor involves doing the majority of worrying, preparing, and managing for the needs of the family. Furthermore, many Christian academic mothers are immersed in conservative gender ideologies outside of the workplace, which make the challenges of working even more salient. Phanco concluded that the “pressure created by the Christian community and by the advocacy of Christian leaders/groups for women to stay at home full time to raise their children instead of work” often leads to inter-role conflict among Christian academic mothers due to the contradictions inherent in the merging of traditional motherhood ideologies and contemporary motherhood ideologies.

Another theme in the research about Christian academic mothers in Christian higher education is that of calling. Sellers, Thomas, Batts, and Ostman conducted a phenomenological study, which revealed that many Christian academic mothers in Christian institutions felt a strong “calling” to their careers as well as to motherhood. This dual calling does not come without challenges, though, as many of the Christian academic mothers in the study described how the conflicting messages of institutional culture, religion, and their own sense of calling conjured up many lonely times of doubt, guilt, and confusion. However, the “sanctification of work,” achieved when experiencing a sense of calling helps many Christian academic mothers in Christian higher education to cope with the inter-role tension that they experience.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY AMONG FACULTY IN SECULAR HIGHER EDUCATION

Though a significant body of literature exists regarding academic motherhood in secular higher education and about Christian academic motherhood in Christian higher education, there is no research that examines the role of religion and spirituality upon the experiences of academic mothers in secular higher education. This lack of research is surprising given the compelling evidence that many faculty members, at all types of higher education institutions (including those that are secular) consider themselves to be spiritual or religious; roughly half of these faculty members identify as some type of Christian (Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, or evangelical Protestant). Recently, scholars have reported that many faculty members at secular colleges and universities are reflecting on how they might connect their religious and spiritual values to their professional roles without sacrificing either. For example, there are a number of Christian faculty members at secular institutions who are striving to integrate their personal and professional
identities by incorporating a biblical worldview, both overtly and covertly, into their teaching and research. In a study conducted by Christy and some of her colleagues, one faculty member discussed her overt use of Jesus’s life as an example of ethical behavior when teaching about ethics in counseling psychology. Another faculty member described his covert use of biblically based conceptualizations of social justice in his teaching and research.\(^{25}\)

Palmer suggested that faculty members who attend to their inner lives are more likely to bring their whole selves into their academic work and to serve as role models for students who seek the same wholeness.\(^{26}\) Because of the significance of religion and spirituality in the lives of many faculty members in higher education, Lindholm\(^{27}\) encouraged faculty to strive for “an integrated identity that incorporates personal and professional passions” and to consider the level of congruence between their personal and professional values. In response to Lindholm’s encouragement and the national data that describe the prevalence of the Christian identity among religious faculty in higher education, coupled with the lack of research about religion or spirituality in the experience of academic mothers in secular higher education, Christy, a qualitative researcher who identifies as an evangelical Christian, conducted an autoethnographic study of her own experiences as a new academic mother. Jo, a Christian graduate student and fellow mother of a young child, assisted her with the data analysis and interpretation processes. The guiding research question for the larger study from which this is a part was as follows: What are the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of an evangelical Christian associate professor during her first semester of full-time academic work at a secular institution after being on leave with her first child? This article will focus solely upon the role and impact of Christy’s religious identity in her transition back to work at a secular higher education institution after becoming an academic mother. Other findings about her challenges related to her academic work and childcare responsibilities are discussed elsewhere.\(^{28}\)

**METHOD**

Autoethnography seemed to be the ideal method for investigating the research question guiding this study. Autoethnographic studies use a researcher’s autobiographical data to analyze and to interpret her cultural assumptions about a given topic.\(^{29}\) This method is ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation. The intent of an autoethnographic study is not to reach generalizable conclusions, but rather to represent a personal, constructed perspective of a given experience in hopes of shedding light on how the nuanced complexities of that experience is played out in both personal and professional contexts. Typically, authoethnographies are
written in the first person, but because authorship of this study is shared third person seemed most appropriate.

Procedure

Data collection

Researchers using autoethnography recognize the importance of stories in the process of developing and representing people’s constructions of the world around them. Our own stories help to create a coherent, yet subjective, understanding of our life experiences. To that end, Christy used writing as the method of inquiry and data collection for this study, because writing is a critical tool for collecting, presenting, and analyzing data.

Christy collected one narrative data set by journaling. After she gave birth to Levi on October 19, 2010, she was able to be at home with him for 12 weeks until the Spring 2011 semester began in mid-January. While she was on leave, she continued to respond to email messages as needed and even attended the dissertation defense of a doctoral student for whom she served as major professor. Though she did not fully return to work until mid-January, Christy began making journal entries on December 31, 2010, when she first started anticipating her return back to work; she regularly documented her thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to returning to work after having assumed her new role as an academic mother until the conclusion of the Spring 2011 semester in mid-May. Christy also compiled personal memory data, including an autobiographical timeline, for this study. According to Chang, “personal memory” data “is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self, and memory opens a door to the richness of the past.”

Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation involved a “balancing act between fracturing and connecting, between zooming in and zooming out.” Fracturing, or categorizing, involved two main activities: coding and organizing data. For this study, Christy and Jo independently engaged in this fracturing process before meeting to discuss the emerging findings. Upon meeting, they engaged in the last three components of the data analysis process: connecting, zooming in, and zooming out. “Connecting” involved their attempts “to understand the data in context, using various methods to identify the relationships among the different elements of the data.” By “zooming in,” they engaged in a microscopic analysis of the data through which they paid attention to details and probed into small segments at a time. Finally, the “zooming out” process involved taking a bird’s-eye view of the data, which enabled them to see how Christy’s case is related to others, to its context, and to the past.
Trustworthiness

The methodology of this study places Christy in the roles of both researcher and subject; these roles are intertwined and complex. Though the narrative data reflects Christy’s personal, subjective views of the world at the time of the data collection process, she and Jo attempted to present the data in an objective and detailed manner, allowing the readers to judge for themselves the credibility of the interpretation of it. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of this research was enhanced through analyst triangulation, member checking, and the establishment of an audit trail. Analyst triangulation involves the use of two or more people who independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings. Although the data reflected only Christy’s experiences, both Christy and Jo analyzed and interpreted it to increase the trustworthiness of the research. Also, Christy engaged in member checking by providing the resulting manuscripts to the individuals mentioned in her journal so that they could provide feedback about their words and actions. Furthermore, an audit trail was established as both authors clearly documented all research decisions and activities throughout the course of the project.

RESULTS

Three interesting themes emerged from this autoethnographic study that illuminate some of Christy’s most salient challenges as she attempted to fulfill her responsibilities as a Christian academic mother. One of the themes focuses upon Christy’s ongoing struggle to determine whether or not she, a new mother with a young child (Levi), should even continue working full-time outside of the home. The second theme reflects her desire to prioritize her relationship with God yet the challenges she faced while trying to do so. And, finally, the third theme represents Christy’s recognition of her need for God’s help and ways in which she recognized that help, as she transitioned back to academic work after her maternity leave.

A Christian, a Mother, and an Academic: Can It Work? Should it Work?

Even before returning to work after maternity leave, Christy began to question whether or not she should be working full-time outside of the home; this question lingered in her mind throughout her entire first semester back at work. On December 31, she noted the following in her journal: “There are many men and women within Christian circles who believe that mothers should not work outside of the home. I feel judged by others, especially Christian women. Most of the women in my church are stay-at-home moms who homeschool their children.” Although each Christian church holds
differing views on mothers working outside the home, what Christy felt in her own church made her strongly question her decision to return to work. Given her questions (and with less than 3 weeks before she would need to return to work after her maternity leave), Christy began to search for articles on the Internet that would provide insight into this controversial issue. It did not take long for her to find an article that, although she interpreted it as nonsense, provoked some additional critical reflection on her part:

I recently read an online article entitled “Should a Christian Mother Work Outside the Home” written by a pastor by the name of Art Kohl. In it, he cites a biblical passage (1 Timothy 5:14) that states that younger women should guide the house. What he fails to cite, however, is the context of the passage: It was directed toward young widows. Nor does the passage imply that one must not work outside of the home in order to “guide the house.” He also cites Titus 2:4–5 that reads that older women are to teach younger women to be “keepers at home.” He goes on to say that the first mistake that women ever made was to go to the workplace in that Eve went out to tend the garden with Adam (Genesis 2:8–9). He stated, “Do not forsake motherhood for money. Do not miss motherhood for a career.” Later in the article he wrote, “The workplace is no place for a Christian woman. It is too hard to be spiritual there. It will wear you down.” Interestingly, Pastor Kohl does enumerate instances when it is acceptable for a Christian woman to work outside of the home (e.g., she is a widow; she is married to a man with a disability). Even so, his justification falls far short of being credible.

The day after making that journal entry, Christy shared some of her thoughts and concerns with her husband (Dave). Later that night, she wrote, “This evening, Dave came to me with the Bible in his hand and told me that I should add Proverbs 31 to my work. ‘It’s all the power that you need,’ he said” (January 1). Indeed, many Christians commonly reference this text when discussing the biblical view of a “virtuous” woman. A portion of the biblical passage that highlights the Proverbs 31 woman’s roles both at home and at work follows:

Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies . . . She seeks wool and flax and willingly works with her hands . . . She considers a field and buys it; from her profits, she plants a vineyard . . . She makes linen garments and sells them and supplies sashes for the merchants . . . She watches over the ways of her household. (Proverbs 31: 1, 13, 16, 24, 27)

Christy gained a certain amount of peace just knowing that Dave was supportive of her academic work and had provided a biblical reference to encourage her that it is possible and appropriate for her to be working full-time as a Christian mother with a young child. It is interesting to note that
such conversations about Christian women in the full-time workforce did not occur between Christy and Dave prior to Levi’s birth.

While still feeling unsettled about Christian mothers in the full-time workforce, and because resigning mid-year was not appropriate in her eyes, Christy went back to work full-time on January 19. She did so with the plan to minimize daycare as much as possible, so as to maximize her time with Levi. The following morning, she attended the first session of a new women’s Bible study at her church. She wrote the following about her experience at that first session:

It was advertised as a women’s group with childcare provided. Most of the women there were either older and/or retired or they were stay-at-home moms. I knew that I wouldn’t quite fit in. In fact, when I met someone for the first time and explained to her that I taught at State University, she seemed quite puzzled as to how I could be attending the Wednesday morning Bible study while still maintaining full-time employment at State University. Her question led me to explain to her how we had a plan and hoped that it worked in terms of childcare for Levi. (January 20)

Even though this woman’s question was not intended to suggest that Christy should not be working full-time outside of the home, it was her question that reignited Christy’s concerns about whether it was possible, or even desirable, to be doing so as a Christian mother with a young child. Because Christy still lacked clarity about her viewpoint on this issue, she continued to trudge through her first semester back at work, although she only attended this women’s Bible study a few additional times because of feeling like she should devote that time to responding to work-related emails and other tasks from home.

After that experience in the first session of the women’s Bible study, Christy wrote very little about the issue of whether or not a Christian mother should be working full-time until near the end of her first semester back at work. One of her final journal entries reflected her end-of-semester thoughts about her full-time employment as a Christian mother:

Dave and I both believe that God wants me here at State University where I can be a witness for Him and an encouragement to Christian graduate students. I must admit, though, the temptation to resign has been great. In fact, I’ve mentioned it on more than one occasion when discussing (or crying about!) these issues with Dave. But, my work provides a good income along with health insurance for both Levi and me. (May 12)

As Christy identified the spiritual importance and practical benefits of her academic work, and as she reflected on her love for her work, she gained
some peace to stick with it in spite of the temptation to resign that surfaced as a result of the internal struggle that she was experiencing concerning being a Christian mother in the full-time workforce.

Wanting to Keep God First Yet Failing to Do So

While grappling with whether or not she should even continue working full-time as a Christian academic mother, Christy spent much of her first semester back at work struggling to find strategies for keeping God first in her life. Prior to become a mother, Christy had regularly attended church on Sundays and had frequently been involved in small group Bible studies. Moreover, she had made great efforts to read a portion of the Bible and to pray every day. Shortly before she returned to work after maternity leave, Christy outlined her priorities in the following manner:

I want to prioritize motherhood while still maintaining a good work ethic in my career. I want as much weight to be given to motherhood as possible without having detrimental effects upon my career. And, none of this seems to take into account my need to prioritize my relationship with God first and my relationship with my husband second. Those relationships are crucial for my success and well being as both a mother and a professor. (January 8)

Christy recognized very early on in the semester that her relationship with God and with her husband would be “crucial” in the coming days; indeed, those relationships had been a priority to her prior to Levi’s birth. Just two weeks after that entry in her journal, and after being back at work long enough to realize that she would not have as much time to devote to her career, Christy reflected on her need to prioritize God in her life to “thrive” rather than simply to “survive.” She wrote,

According to the Scriptures, I’m supposed to keep God and His Kingdom first and then He’ll take care of the rest. Perhaps my focus should be upon that: focusing on God and trusting in His grace and wisdom to see me through and even to help me thrive rather than just survive. (January 22)

One way that Christy attempted to stay focused on God was by her decision to attend the Wednesday morning women’s Bible study at her church that was mentioned earlier. She felt that this would be an ideal way to stay focused on God and to meet some other women in the church, while having childcare for Levi right down the hallway from where the women were meeting. All she had to do was check Levi into the nursery, give the nursery workers a few instructions, and then turn her cell phone on to the silent, vibrate mode so that she could receive their notification should a

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problem arise with Levi. What she had failed to consider was that her cell phone would vibrate every time an email or text message came through as well. One morning at one of the few Bible study sessions that she ended up attending, she received approximately 20 work-related email messages within the first hour or so of the meeting (which she continually checked because she thought it might be the nursery trying to reach her); as a result, she excused herself from the meeting before it had officially concluded. She documented a portion of this experience in her journal:

As I was standing up and putting on my coat, the lady next to me calmly said, “Did you know that the nursery has pagers that you can use instead of using your phone?” Pagers? Really? With a huge sigh of relief, I said, “No, I didn’t. Thanks for telling me.” Who knew that a pager would be a tool that would help me separate from work for a while in order to focus upon my spiritual wellbeing? I will turn my phone off from here on out while at Bible study. That will help me separate myself from the “tyranny of the urgent” where work is concerned. My focus will be upon God, unless the pager alerts me to the fact that God wants me to focus on my son. (January 27).

As mentioned earlier, however, she only attended the Bible study a few times; she felt too overwhelmed with work responsibilities to continue as the semester progressed. The decision to stop attending the study, though, created more guilt for her about her failure to keep God first in her life.

Christy also struggled to find the time to invest in her relationship with God at other times during the week. In February, as she was considering her need to sacrifice sleep to get everything done while still having free time to herself to focus on God, she wrote,

If I do get up early, my focus needs to be on God first. I need to read my Bible and pray during those times and use the daytime hours for other work. [A passage in the Bible reads] “Seek first His Kingdom and all of these things will be added unto you.” (February 6)

However, she chose not to sacrifice sleep, believing that the fatigue she would experience would simply make her struggle worse. And although she continued to believe that she needed to keep God first in her life, she found herself failing to do so. Rather, what she perceived as more urgent or practical needs (e.g., preparing for classes, taking care of family needs) seemed to always overshadow those that seemed, on the surface, to be less urgent or practical.

It was not until the end of the semester that Christy came to the conclusion that her lack of focus on God might have led to some of the difficulty
she had experienced her first semester back at work. On May 12, she wrote
the following in her journal:

While I know that I need to make sure God remains first in my life, I
haven't even had time to read the Bible, let alone pray. I feel like I'm
in a dry and weary land where my spiritual life is concerned. I'm giving
everything I have to my husband, son, and job, and there's nothing left
over. Nor does it seem like I'm being refueled in any way. I wonder if
this semester has been difficult due to the fact that I haven't made the
sacrifices necessary to keep God first in my life.

It was then that she finally identified a plan that could change her focus:

I did take a step, though, and used my Mother's Day money to buy the
New Testament [part of the Bible] on CD. I figured that since I'm driving
a lot anyway (e.g., taking and picking Levi up), at least I will have the
opportunity to hear the Bible for about 30 minutes (or more) a day.
(May 12)

So, though Christy’s desire to keep God first in her life was not consistent
during her first semester back at work after maternity leave, she ended that
semester with a new plan and corresponding hope for positive change
and improved personal well-being.

Desperately Seeking and Graciously Receiving God's Help

In spite of the fact that Christy struggled to maintain a priority upon God in
the sense of spending time reading and studying the Bible and praying, she
still regularly reflected upon her need for God’s assistance during her first
semester back at work. While only a couple of weeks into the semester,
she requested prayer from the ladies at the women's Bible study mentioned
earlier. On January 27, she wrote the following in her journal: “With a shaky
voice and tears in my eyes, I said, ‘Could you please pray for me, that I would
figure out how to balance work with motherhood?’”

Not long after that, Christy began to recognize God’s answers to her
prayers. On February 6, she wrote, “I’m doing my best. And, I believe that
God is blessing my work. Whenever I'm in the office, I am able to work
efficiently and to get a lot accomplished.” And, on March 2, she wrote,

My only goal for the teaching portion of my job this year is to revise
the “Research Methods” course. Once again, I saw God’s hand at
work here in that my SAGE representative sent me an exam copy of a
new “Research Methods” textbook that has wonderful supplemental
resources and will be perfect for my online course!
And, at the end of the semester after she had started listening to her Bible on CD, she described her thoughts and feelings in a very enthusiastic manner:

When I got into the car, I put in the 1 Corinthians CD. When my errand running was done, I realized that I had listened to eleven entire chapters! And, upon returning home, rather than feeling run-down, I was feeling strengthened. I really believe that my spiritual life is going to get back on track. My relationship with God is going to become vibrant once again. I’m so glad that His mercies are new every morning, and that He is a loving and forgiving God. Though I have neglected Him, He is eager to have me back in His arms. I look forward to the changes that will happen in my heart and life as a result of listening to the Bible on CD while I’m in my car. (May 14)

One other interesting observation about Christy’s recognition of her need for God’s help came as a result of a research opportunity that presented itself to her mid-semester. After inquiring about the opportunity, and then feeling bad about the fact she had told the individual with whom she had spoken about the opportunity that she was seeking existing data with which to work since she had just returned from maternity leave and had a new baby for which to care, she wrote the following in her journal:

I came to the conclusion that this is all in God’s hands. It’s possible that He has opened this door of opportunity for me. At the same time, perhaps my decision to share about Levi was orchestrated by Him as well as a way that He will close the door to the opportunity. What I need to remember is that He is sovereign and knows my needs (e.g., research expectations). I trust that He will make it clear as to whether or not this opportunity is something for me to pursue. (March 2)

Clearly, Christy never doubted that God would take care of her. And, in many ways, she believed that God was responsible for many of the work-related opportunities and outcomes that she experienced.

**DISCUSSION**

During her first semester back at work after becoming an academic mother, Christy, an evangelical Christian, documented her experiences transitioning back to work in the secular university. Those experiences revealed three themes related to the intersection of her religious worldview and identity with her new role as an academic mother. For one thing, she continued to wonder whether she, as a Christian mother with a young child at home, even belonged in the full-time workforce. Moreover, she lost her focus on God and on the importance of keeping God first in her life. In spite of feeling like
she was neglecting her relationship with God, Christy desperately sought and graciously received his help throughout the semester. These themes lead to several interesting discussion items concerning the experiences of religious academic mothers in secular higher education.

Empathy, Validation, and Gender Role Expectations

Early on in the semester, it became quite clear that Christy needed others’ affirmation and support in her endeavor to be successful as an academic mother. In her first semester back at work after her maternity leave, she attempted to find a sense of community within the women’s Bible study offered through her church. Her lack of ability to identify others who empathized with her in the study was one reason she did not continue in the group. This need for understanding was described as a “first-order need” by the Christian academic mothers in the study conducted by Hall, Anderson, and Willingham. Christian academic mothers need role models and mentoring from others who have had similar experiences and need the support of others who can empathize with their unique challenges.

What makes this need for empathetic others particularly challenging for Christian academic mothers is the gender role expectations that exist within some sections of the Christian subculture. Sellers, Thomas, Batts, and Ostman provided an excellent description of the situation facing many Christian academic mothers: “Given the message in some Christian communities that once women become mothers, they should stay home with their children and cease to participate in a significant way in their careers, the support of other professional, faith-filled women became essential.” Indeed, within some Christian subcultures, the ideal of the stay-at-home mother has been strongly endorsed. Many Christian couples express support for the dominant, family ideals of husband providership and wifely domesticity. In such subcultures, women receive positive support from their significant others and church communities concerning their employment only if the women are single or if they are mothers who must be employed out of economic necessity. However, if Christian mothers simply choose to work outside of the home for other reasons (e.g., to pursue a personal calling), the religious subculture is generally less accepting. And, because Christy was working at a secular institution, she was unable to identify any other Christian academic mothers from within her workplace who could provide much-needed validation for her role in the academy. Many Christian academic mothers, such as Christy, seek validation from others who embrace the same religious worldview.

Though she lacked Christian role models, both within her church community and within her secular institution, Christy strongly leaned upon the empathy and validation provided by her husband, Dave, during her first semester back at work after maternity leave. Dave initially provided validation by suggesting that she review Proverbs 31. He continued to express his
emotional support by his ongoing encouragement about her work. The husband as emotional supporter is a theme in the research about Christian academic mothers at Christian colleges and universities as well. Sellers, Thomas, Batts, and Ostman found that husbands played a significant role in a Christian academic mother’s sense that she could live out her commitments and passions in both domains.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, Thorstad and colleagues determined that the spouses of Christian academic mothers provided crucial emotional support in the form of mutual respect, pride in their wives’ accomplishments, and interest in their wives’ work.\textsuperscript{46} Though Christy received empathy and validation from her husband, the lack of such support from within her church only exasperated the value incongruence that she experienced.

Layers of Value Incongruence

It can be argued that most people strive for congruency in their lives. Everyone holds values that represent their general beliefs about the importance of normatively desirable behaviors or end states.\textsuperscript{47} People seek congruence between their personal values and their behaviors as well as between their personal values and those of the organizations in which they live and work. Such value congruence\textsuperscript{48} is often based on a person’s subjective assessment, using personal perceptions to make such an assessment.\textsuperscript{49} A substantial amount of research has underscored the importance of value congruence, indicating that such congruence usually provides favorable outcomes for individuals, including their ability to lead what they perceive as fulfilling lives.\textsuperscript{50}

One layer in which Christy experienced value incongruence during her first semester back at work after becoming an academic mother was intrapersonal. Like the Christian academic mothers who worked at Christian colleges and universities and who participated in the study conducted by Hall, Anderson, and Willingham,\textsuperscript{51} Christy’s espoused priorities were based on her Christian worldview. Though she claimed that keeping God first in her life was her highest value and number one priority, she repeatedly failed to enact that priority. And, she blamed some, if not most, of her challenges as a new academic mother that first semester on the reality that her actual behavior did not align with her espoused values. Interestingly, Barnett and Hyde reported that a discrepancy between ideals and actual behavior might accentuate the tension common to the experience of working mothers.\textsuperscript{52} Christy believes that she experienced such tension.

Another layer of value incongruence that Christy experienced both before and after Levi’s birth was that between her personal values and the values of the secular institution in which she was working. Christy desperately sought validation and support for her work from a biblical worldview; however, the secular institution at which she was working, like most
institutions of its kind, does not promote Christian values. And, none of the academic mothers with whom she interacted at work seemed to represent the Christian role model or mentor that she sought. This lack of identified Christian academic mothers within her secular university resulted in Christy’s questioning whether or not she belonged in the full-time workforce. Although she might have found greater congruence between her values and those of a Christian college or university, research suggests that many Christian academic mothers experience value incongruence even within Christian higher education, stating that they feel as though their Christian institutions do not allow them to live out their priorities (e.g., prioritizing their children higher than their careers). Though Christy experienced value incongruence, she continued to persist in her work. Like many of the Christian academic mothers in Christian universities, she sensed a calling to her work in the secular academy; that calling provided the strength and motivation for her persistence.

Spirituality, Calling, and Problem-Solving

One of the positive effects of spirituality upon individuals relates to its problem-solving qualities. Emmons suggested that spirituality can revise, reprioritize, and integrate goals. Attempts at solutions that involve a collaborative effort with God appear to be more helpful than those that simply defer responsibility to God. Christy’s sense of calling, coupled with her decision to collaborate with God by seeking his assistance during her first semester back at work (e.g., praying, listening to the Bible on CD in her car) were two of the ways in which her spirituality influenced her attempts to solve the “problem” of fulfilling her multiple responsibilities.

Much of the research about Christian academic mothers in Christian higher education institutions suggests that many of them also use their spirituality in their problem-solving pursuits as they attempt to fulfill their dual calling as academician and mother. For example, Oates, Hall, and Anderson reported that the Christian academic mothers who had a sense of calling to their work were better able to manage their multiple responsibilities. For one thing, they benefited from a type of transcendent source of strength above and beyond what would be considered humanly possible. Moreover, these women believed that if they pursued their dual calling, to their families as well as to their workplace, they would be forgiven for mistakes or failures. “Spiritual surrender,” the belief that the ultimate responsibility to make sure things work out was God’s, released them from guilt-induced responses to failure. Christy demonstrated a level of spiritual surrender during her first semester back at work.

Also, Christy sought solutions that involved collaborating with God. Not only did she initiate such collaboration through prayer, but also she looked for ways to combine career and family responsibilities in a way that
prioritized her relationship with God. Her decision to listen to the Bible on CD in her car was one example in which she engaged in “weaving” together her two areas of calling. According to Garey, weaving is often used as a strategy to combine career and family when those roles are not viewed as conflicting but rather viewed as roles that need to be integrated to the fullest extent possible. By using her time in the car when driving to and from work, daycare, and home, Christy attempted to weave her responsibilities while maintaining a focus upon God.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the challenges associated with being an evangelical Christian academic mother in a secular university, Christy maintained her religious commitment because of her belief in the credibility of the Christian worldview along with the spiritual benefits that she gained from it (e.g., peace of mind that God would enable her to fulfill her dual calling). Although she considered resigning from her position due to the stress she experienced in attempting to fulfill her dual calling, she never considered discarding her Christian identity. Indeed, her calling to the university did not change as a result of Levi’s birth. Both before and after Levi’s birth, Christy described her calling as that pertaining to reflecting Christ in a secular atmosphere. Rather, much of the struggle that she faced came as a result of adding a new calling (motherhood) to her existing calling to the academy.

A significant limitation of this study is that the experiences of one evangelical Christian academic mother, with regard to her dual calling to motherhood and career, may look quite different to those of academic mothers from other religious or spiritual traditions. It is likely that there are added layers of value incongruence faced by Jewish or Muslim academic mothers, for instance, in that they might also experience cultural dimensions of resistance. Future research should explore their experiences along with the experiences of academic fathers of various religious and spiritual traditions.

In spite of the aforementioned limitation and need for further research, several interesting implications emerged from Christy’s experiences transitioning into academic motherhood as an evangelical Christian working at a secular institution. First, empathy and validation are crucial to the personal wellness of many academic mothers. So, academic mothers of all religious and spiritual traditions, including those who are nonreligious, are encouraged to seek and to embrace empathy and validation from whomever is willing to extend it. Equally important is the charge for academic mothers to disregard judgments, whether real or imagined, from those who might disapprove of their dual calling to motherhood and career. In addition, other faculty members and administrators are encouraged to provide emotional support to academic mothers who are pursuing their dual calling.
A second implication is that religious academic mothers at secular institutions are encouraged to develop support networks with each other and with academic mothers from other religious and nonreligious perspectives from which to garner strength and encouragement to face work-related and familial challenges together. These support networks are crucial, because some academic mothers, such as Christy, might experience value incongruence at their higher education institutions as they strive to fulfill their responsibilities in environments that might not be sensitive to their faith-based priorities. Having a wide support network increases the chance that someone in that network will be able to empathize and provide support.

Finally, perhaps the most important implication of this study is that academic mothers who identify as religious and/or spiritual are encouraged to recognize the significance of their dual calling and to incorporate their faith, and all the positives that they believe they receive from and experience with it, into their strategies for fulfilling their dual calling. Without regularly reflecting on their calling to higher education and drawing upon the religious and/or spiritual resources available to them, academic mothers of various religious and spiritual traditions will likely face significant struggles that lead them to question whether to remain in the academy. The absence of such women could result in fewer role models for the next generation of academic mothers, not to mention a significant loss to the human capital in higher education institutions.

NOTES

22. Oates et al., 2005.
27. Lindholm, 2007, 16.
33. Ibid., 128.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 98.
37. Ibid., 129.
40. Hall et al., 2004.
41. Seller et al., 2005.

43. T Seller et al., 2005.
45. Seller et al., 2005.
46. Thorstad et al., 2006.
51. Hall et al., 2004.
53. Hall et al., 2004.
54. Seller et al., 2005.
56. Ibid.
57. Oates et al., 2005.