Argument. Why Should We Study Everyday Lives of Catholic Women

Mihai Lucaciu

Chairman for World Youth Connection (Romania),
mihailucaciu@yahoo.co.uk

Assuming that all cultures have gender roles, religion affects women differently than men. What have Catholic women's religious lives, roles, and images been like? Although all women share a common experience of being women, differences of class, race, religion, culture, and sexual orientation separate them, and therefore taking into account women's experiences and views can be a difficult task in complex religious contexts. Religious practices have different significance to men and women and their engagement is different. In foraging and horticultural societies, women and men have more egalitarian and complementary roles and women play significant roles in religion – while in agrarian societies the situation is quite different. Large denominations such as Roman Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Orthodox Judaism are strongly against the ordination of women to sacramental ministry. Catholic women are left with a God with whom they cannot identify and who cannot identify with them.

Religion is not only an abstract set of ideas but also something practiced by people, and half of all people are women. Assuming that all cultures have gender roles, religion affects women differently than men. What have Catholic women's religious lives, roles, and images been like? Until recently those subjects were *terra incognita* in society and were rarely discussed in academic environments. This ignoring practice is not acceptable anymore: we have to add more information about women and their everyday lives and struggles and analyse it in an academic environment to be treated gender equally in a gender biased context. Catholic communities encompass many patriarchal manners that have to be contested. Because the solutions are not very

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clear, we have to research what kind of information is actually relevant to women's religious experiences, how they interact in traditional religious contexts such as Catholicism, and how their lives are changed and influenced by their religious adherence. Too often feminist criticism maintains philosophical distance and is aimed at abstraction, and in this case it neglects actual beliefs and believers, especially devoted women and marginalized people. One-dimensional concepts and models of knowledge are disputed, and they do not related well to large groups of believers. There is a strong desire to break and transform the patriarchal monotheistic order and highlight and reflect more on 'women's experiences.' From this perspective, there is a danger of applying a new form of essentialism or universalism in referring to women's experiences. A paradigmatic change can come from an increased interest in more concrete everyday practices of very different women, their diverse contexts and their multivarious practices of belief (see de Haardt, Korte 2002:1-26).

Derrida rightly stresses the parochialism of the universalistic claim of a particular type of spirituality as 'religion'; particularly when this claim is broadcast by Christian missions and colonial states, and is now reinforced by the alliance between Christianity, capitalism, and the scientific-technological complex of today. Catholicism is beyond any form of redemption from those characteristics: it represents oppression in itself. Derrida's distrust of the potentially deceptive nature of pacifist and ecumenical projects is profound. Derrida, in an attempt to bring out the parochial Christian prejudice implied in our thinking about religion, with his enormous display of etymological claims (rival Indo-European and non-Indo-European etymologies could be emphasized in at least some cases cited by Derrida) he asks the question of whether a form of radical transcendence of cultural constraints in intercultural communication is possible. Genealogies, etymologies, histories, the very constitutive elements of a religious tradition with which Derrida is familiar and that he greatly stresses can only bring out historical, unalterable generic relationships, since that is the idiom in which they happen to be expressed. They cannot reveal formal, structural similarities that may have historical roots now lost to consciousness, between people initially pursuing historically unrelated cultures, religions, and languages. The most appropriate approach is not in terms of either-or, but the admitting of the tension which exist between the parochial and the universal approach to concepts of religion, before a different—less 'Roman', less 'Catholic', less 'Mediterranean'—audience, and Derrida is encouraging such an approach (Derrida 1998). In postcolonial realities, Christian women's intellectual, political and psychological positions are

contradictory because of layers of colonial, gendered, and religious regimes. They exist both as colonial patriarchal objects and also as colonizing race-privileged subjects (see also Donaldson, Kwok 2002: 2-44).

Our male biased culture does not differentiate between the study of religion as an academic discipline and the personal practice of religion. In this context religious studies challenge one's personal belief more than the study of other academic subjects, and everyday religious practices represent a common place of inequality and stereotypes. A pertinent academic analysis of such practices can bring to light the way that patriarchal routines are reproduced in society. Knowing about and understanding a religion is very different from adhering and believing in it and this distinction is crucial in the academic study of religion. Religion comes as a major mover and motivator in human culture. Therefore it is impossible to understand human history and culture and the construction of social mechanisms while ignoring religion. Only an extremely narrow part of life and culture can be understood, even in a strongly secularised society, while ignoring its link to religion. We have to take controversial materials about which people care deeply and place them in a neutral academic setting so that we can examine them and learn about them. Personal agreement or disagreement with religious symbols, rituals, and beliefs that we analyse is irrelevant in such a medium. Scholars may debate alternative hypotheses or meanings of the information that is studied, but a debate about the truth or falsity of religious ideas is irrelevant to an academic anthropological study of religion. (Gross 1996: 5-8)

In examining Catholic views on women in the nineteenth century, MacHaffie (1986: 93-95) and other historians have detected a major change in traditional Christian stereotypes about women. In new theological writings, women are no longer seen as inevitably inclined toward sin and lust, following the pattern of Eve, but as morally and spiritually superior to men, though still weak and so delicate that they must avoid the rough worlds of politics and business. As a result, women have become a major support but not leaders of most religious bodies, as men have become less occupied with religious issues. Especially for middle class women, the combination of education, free time, and a sense of moral superiority has led to increased activity in religious organisations dedicated to charity and missionary goals. The various societies run by and for women have complied with rather than violated women's so-called 'proper space', but at the same time have allowed Catholic women to have activities outside the home and have provided companionship, have allowed them to develop organisational skills, and have given them

activities in which they could experience a sense of accomplishment (see Boylan 1989: 166-178).

At the beginning of the feminist movement in religion, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical feminists pointed out that women were excluded from the full practice of Christianity. The masculine language of the liturgy, monolithically male images of deity, and male monopoly of all visible roles beyond singing in the choir, baking, and teaching young children, were objects of analysis and were used as evidence to attack the patriarchy of Christianity and especially Catholicism (Gross 1995: 40-42). Even if women were and still are largely barred from leadership roles, they form the main part of their churches and do most of the day-to-day work required to keep religious institutions functioning. In its structures, Catholicism remained a strongly conservative and male-biased institution that escaped the feminist critiques from inside and outside of the church.

Large denominations such as Roman Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Orthodox Judaism are strongly against the ordination of women to sacramental ministry. Ordination of women is one of the indicators of denominations becoming less patriarchal ('depatriarchaling') and of the adoption of a perspective of women as more active members of their communities. It has become a symbol and almost a cliché for a quick evaluation of the position of women in any given denomination. Another very important indicator is the way in which traditional liturgies are male-centred and how they are rewritten and reread without using masculine language, both in describing worshippers and describing the deity. Many congregations started to ordain women only after very recent demands of women's movements inside those specific congregations and this can be an example how women within churches can change male-centred institutions such as ordination. Though many Catholics and some elements of the Catholic hierarchy support women's ordination, the Vatican issued an official statement in 1976 declaring that women could not be admitted to priesthood and this statement is still valid. The main argument is that the priest is the representative of Jesus before the Christian congregation, and since Jesus was a male, only another male can represent him. This reason has been heavily criticised on theological grounds and feminist theology builds a strong case against this type of arguments. Church teaching on sexism is still evident, e.g. in Vatican's rejection of inclusive language, indicating that women are not to be included in the liturgy by the addition of the word *sister* to *brother* in various dogmatic texts (The Catholic World Report 1997: 46-47).

Although all women share a common experience of being women, differences of class, race, religion, culture, and sexual orientation separate

them, and therefore taking into account women's experiences and views can be a difficult task in complex religious contexts. Women that are not white middle-class heterosexual Christians can feel excluded by the 'women's experience' argument and can feel that their particular experiences are not taken seriously by the dominant women-friendly perspective on religion. It is not only that their experiences have been overlooked: to many it has seemed that white middle-class heterosexual Catholic women have assumed that they could speak for all women. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many scholars from a largely variety of Christian perspectives have brought new approaches to Christian feminism. Womanist, mujerista, Latin American, Asian, and lesbian voices have all articulated visions and versions of Christian feminism. The womanist perspective developed in the 1980s as black feminist sought to articulate their experience and the way it differs from other feminists. The term 'womanist' was introduced by Alice Walker, who considers that "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (as cited in Gross 1996: 54). Womanist views on religion add the critique of white racism and the need for black unity to the feminst criticism of sexism and the need for unity of women against patriarchy in religious communities. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tarango consider mujerista to be a Hispanic woman that struggles to liberate herself not as an individual but as a member of a community (in Ruether, Keller 1995: 446-448). Those rather new approaches have shown that factors beyond sexism must be taken into account to explain and understand specific contexts, because not only male dominance but also class stratification, racism, and homophobia affect the religious lives of women within their churches. A good comprehension of patriarchy and male dominance in Catholicism is nuanced by the dynamics of class, race, culture, and sexual orientation that white middle class heterosexual women have often ignored. Class and race analysis are especially relevant to womanist, mujerista and Latin American perspectives.

Asian Christians practice Christianity in cultures that are vastly different from the Catholic West, and they sometimes have to deal with a heritage of colonial dominance. Lesbians identify heterosexism as a major error of conventional religions such as Catholicism. Marital values were imposed in colonial religious communities as part of heterosexual theological discourses of sexual usage of persons in relationships. In colonial marriage, women were part of a family according to claimed rates of labour, basically reproductive work, and also according to the needs of the peasants and urban workers. Non-heterosexual marriages and divorce were not approved because there was no utility: they

weren't able to produce future children. Catholic sexual discourses merely supported the mystical and unquestionable basis for the perpetuation of male religious authority (Althaus-Reid 2000: 20-46).

The anthropological distinction between authority (seen as public and formal) and power (seen as informal and usually not publicly acknowledged) is necessary in order to avoid seeing women in traditional religions such as Catholicism as completely powerless. No matter how male dominated a community can be, it also includes women. How these women react to such male dominance is an important and interesting issue. Even in most patriarchal religions such as Hinduism or Islamism, women still have a rich, well-developed, and largely female set of religious practices that involve no male participation or control. Catholicism is no exception. Those practices are seen as less interesting and relevant than men's practices. For a better understanding of women's roles within Catholicism, a focus and evaluation of what women currently do and think is required, even if their interests have been kept in the shadow. Such accounts must include descriptions of women's lives and consciousness, of their own experiences of the religious context in which they live. Cultural stereotypes and norms concerning women and femininity that exist in almost all religions have to be analysed. An important step is to see the discontinuity of these norms and people's actual lives. Cultural stereotypes and normative laws about women cannot be a substitute for information about what women actually do and think. Religious practices have different significance to men and women and their engagement is different. How do women perceive and cope with the inferior status that is imposed upon them in Catholic communities? How do they socialize in their assigned roles? Do they simply accept them or do they protest against inequality? Women have to be studied as religious subjects in their own right and not as objects in the religious universe of men.

Catholic tradition is accepted by women through a process of socialization, and is accepted in specific spaces and time intervals. Catholic women live by this tradition as they received it during socialization and as they constructed it within the parameters of socialization. This construction is inevitably influenced by race, class, sexual orientation, and culture. Sometimes they abide within the boundaries that are imposed upon them, coming to understand themselves through the dominant culture of their society (for instance, the self-understanding that comes with being a poor white Romanian woman from Transylvania in twenty-first century Eastern Europe). At the intersection of these identities they construct their actual religious practices. These traditions come as scripts, di-

recting their roles and practices, coded by experienced ideologies (see Bons-Storm, R.*'I Have Only One Body!'. The Conflict Between 'Love' and Integrity in Everyday Practices*. in de Haardt, Korte 2002: 125-140). The context in which persons are socialized, the way that specific scripts confirm or contradict each other, and the personal resistance to those scripts are important issues in how a script is more or less compulsive for a person.

Religion can basically have two major effects on women's lives: it can validate women's domestic roles in a deeply male-biased context, and it can pull women from their usual activities into more unusual roles as nuns, leaders, and founders of religious movements. Even if priesthood and textual studies are reserved for men within Catholicism, charismatic and spiritual movements within Catholicism have been successful especially due to women. Women have used monastic institutions in the past as an alternative to family life and domestic subordinate roles. From those positions they could gain more access to the most treasured and important dimensions of spiritual life, access that was drastically limited by male domination. Catholicism has misogynistic tendencies springing from its asceticism and celibacy for priests, and women are regarded as less spiritual and more material then men in such contexts. This misjudgement results in a different content reflected in the biographies of lives of monastic brothers and sisters. Even if the ideal and standards of piety are identical for men and women, the means of reaching piety is opposed. This antithesis comes especially from the proportion of manual work and study. Manual labour is more prominent in the sister's service and is different in character as compared to the situation of brothers. Sisters usually engage in the heavy and dirty work, and they work as an example for all women to approach Christ's person. Labour is present in men's biographies especially as intellectual work, but study is never mentioned as a favoured occupation for Catholic women. Manual labour was seen as a primary device for women to direct their inner self in order to be delivered from the pride and disobedience that had the persistant reputation as 'women's sins'. Pride caused the fall of Lucifer; disobedience caused the fall of Adam. As women were seen as more inclined to sin than men, they also have more pride and disobedience, so they have to train harder then men to eradicate these deadly sins. Catholic nuns combined different models of physical activity to show their sisterhood in bodily performances in order to obtain perfection. They embraced the traditional female model of the good housewife, the examples of the desert fathers, and a gendered form of *imitatio Christi*. They identified Christ with Divine Wisdom, represented as the good house-

wife, and they believed that women can become like Christ if they performed domestic tasks, and that the physical effort required would bring them closer to Christ's sufferings. Van Dijk (*'The Pearl Lay Hidden in the Dung'. Reaching for God in Devotio Moderna Sisterbooks*, in de Haardt, Korte 2002: 43-57) shows how the spiritual meaning of all kind of daily activities is emphasised and that the demarcation between religious and non religious activities is not clearly made in Sisterbooks. Manual labour becomes a meditative tool to help sisters identify with Christ: while working they identify their own effort with the sufferings of Jesus. There is no real escape in Christian commitment and Church worship from 'the male power syndrome'. Liberation is still a long way off when the whole male-centred ideology is accepted, along with the crippling moral taboos placed on women. In their own church women still play a subordinate role: men preach, women listen, men pray, women say Amen, men form the clergy and the deaconate, women submit to their authority, men are priests, women sew for the parochial house. Contemporary women's roles in the Catholic Church are primarily that of mother and wife. When a woman moves from these controlled roles, the danger is signalled. The Vatican still preaches against leaving those traditional male/female positions, and favours conservative interpretations of family life (see the latest visit and declaration of the Pope in Croatia, 8th of June 2003). For single women, the Catholic Church can be hostile and alienating, by maintaining the framework of motherhood and family-centred discourse.

Anthropology of religion offers a developmental perspective of religion. Societies are classified as foraging, horticultural, agricultural, industrial, and post-industrial. Certain types of society seem to correlate with certain levels of women's involvement in religion. In foraging and horticultural societies, women and men have more egalitarian and complementary roles and women play significant roles in religion. Agricultural societies are generally patriarchal and women have a smaller role in public religion. Misogyny appears as an effect of limitation of the agency of women and is taken as a norm in traditional societies. Because agriculture rather than foraging and horticulture has dominated European and Asian societies for a long time, patriarchal religions are seen as normal and inevitable, but world religions offer many alternatives that are not all male-biased. In some marginal, non-mainstream religions women have more power and autonomy than in major religions (Gross 1995: 92-100).

There is no religion in the world that labels itself sexist or patriarchal. Religions usually teach their members to treat women properly and usually criticise the way that women are treated in

other religions. Catholicism is no exception to this rule. All religions agree that women have to be treated properly, that they must not be abused or mistreated. Some religions argue that their norms have improved concerning treatment of women compared to those of their predecessors. It is alleged that mistreatment can only be found in other traditions. Most people grow up convinced that women are treated very well in their religion, if they consider the status of women at all. However, when we apply standard definitions of patriarchy and sexism to any great world religion, sexist teachings and institutions are immediately revealed. Usually men are taught to be spiritually superior to women, and they are more likely to meet the tradition's definition of the ideal believer and practitioner. The birth of males is preferred to the birth of females, and men hold most or all roles of authority and prestige in religious organisations. They control and dictate the norms of the traditions for all men and women. In the private sphere, men are given authority over women in their households and women are taught to submit to their authority. Images of ultimate reality or the divine are frequently male in gender whereas female images either are not represented, are called idolatry, or are de-biologised beings and quasi-women, such as representations of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism (Althaus Reid 2000).

According to the feminist evaluation, all these extremely common religious practices are patriarchal and sexist, and are degrading to women and inappropriate. The church itself is maintained as an infallible male elite, and male attitudes are combined with male structures to reinforce and reshape patriarchy. Catholic women are left with a God with whom they cannot identify and who cannot identify with them.

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