

**I'M NOT LOSING MY FAITH; I'M LOSING MY RELIGION:  
A COLLABORATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF FEMINIST  
SPIRITUALITY ON ROMAN CATHOLIC WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

Completed in June 2007, this collaborative study, framed in feminist spirituality, explored the impact of spirituality on Roman Catholic women's development. In eight monthly meetings spanning nine months, seven Roman Catholic and formerly Roman Catholic women gathered to discuss their experiences of and growth in faith and spirituality.

Criteria for participation included maturity, thoughtfulness toward and commitment to their spiritual development, and a willingness to commit to the rigor of the project. All Caucasian, four live in suburban Chicago, three in the city. Ranging in age from the thirties to the seventies, all have graduate degrees and are middle to upper-middle class.

The initial guiding questions of the study were: What is spirituality? What is religion? What is faith? Why do some women stay in the Catholic Church and some leave? These questions evolved to a new guiding question(s) each session which became the focus for the next meeting's discussion. (See Appendix)

Combining the disciplines of religion, spirituality, and women's development four themes emerged: 1) hegemony and power, 2) women's psychological, spiritual and sexual development, 3) feminist spirituality and voice, and 4) transformational learning.

## PRESENTATION: I'm Not Losing My Faith...

The presentation will have four sections: A brief description of the study, small group discussion, dialogue, and closing.

After a brief description of the study (5 minutes), diads will be formed to discuss one of the pivotal questions of the study: what was the turning point in your faith where it became yours not the faith into which you were born and what has your journey been like since then. Each group will share the highlights of their discussion. These issues will be recorded on newsprint and hung. (10 minutes)

After group reporting I will briefly describe the salient issues for each of the findings: hegemony and power, adult development, feminist spirituality and transformational learning. (15 minutes) Comparison and Dialogue/questions will follow for about 10 minutes.

The session will close with a reading of "Coming Home," a poem written by one of the study's participants about what she would most like to remember from the experience.

Handout: Appendix

#### Part IV. Conference Proceedings

### I'M NOT LOSING MY FAITH; I'M LOSING MY RELIGION: A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY ON ROMAN CATHOLIC WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT by Mary Jane Dix, Ed.D.

#### Introduction

There is a change in the air. We are in an age that is moving from a dependence on religion to interdependence possible only with faith. The first is man-made; the second comes directly from God. Fed by a feminist perspective, women of all religious denominations are coming of age, returning to faith, and letting go of religion. (Winter, 1994) Roman Catholicism has been and remains a formidable influence on women, and not always a positive one. It is hegemonic and used to control women resulting in the loss of gifts that would be available to both women and men.

With the advent of Vatican II and the resulting access for women to schools of theology over the past forty years, research has been done through the lens of feminist theologians on the historical, sociological, and theological perspectives of religion. When nourished by this painstaking scholarship of feminist those theologians (Carr, Reuther, Winter, Johnson, Fiorenza, etc.) Roman Catholic women are asking questions and seeing with new eyes to discover the difference between religion and faith and its application in their lives. We are re-membering that God is not "out there" but lives within our hearts, something instinct has suggested for centuries but society dismissed, often causing us to lose heart and question our spiritual identity. We are finding Sophia: wisdom whose spirit is helping us finding our voices. We have something to say. We are worth listening to.

This study was an attempt to get inside the minds and hearts of women, who are questioning,

seeking, longing for another way to be together with each other and with God, to explore the different ways women travel on their journey from religion to faith, from theology to spirit. Of great help in this work is the paradigm of feminist spirituality. It gives language to women's experience. It steps away from patriarchy and walks around the different sides of religion and faith using feminist spirituality as its guide to see structures, beliefs, and attitudes differently. It does not intend to move from one paradigm, patriarchy, to another, feminist spirituality; but to look at the first through the eyes of the second to find a more balanced perspective.

In the end the women of this study realized that together with Sophia, we are enough; we are always enough. And it was like coming home.

## The Study

It began with seven women responding to the questions:

- Why do some women stay in the Church and some women go?
- Is Church different from religion?
- What is church?
- What is spirituality?
- What is faith?

These were explored collaboratively in the study in which we were all equal participants.

I acted as recorder of each session which consisted of deep, probing discussions. At the end of each session we determined the question with which we would begin the next.

(See Appendix) Our time apart was spent in reflection, reading, thinking and praying.

Together we constructed a knowledge which would not have been possible alone.

This kind of listening required in such circumstances is what the Buddha calls *mindfulness* to hear the “quiet places”, the “think tanks of the soul.” (Levoy, p. 21) It is about finding our authenticity, connecting with the True Self.

We’re after something that lies beneath all that noise, something literally un-thinkable, something that is not so much communication as it is communion – a felt language, a silence filled not with emptiness but with presence.” (Levoy, p. 28)

An example of this intense listening is the session about what to call God if not Father. It illuminates the depth of hegemony women feel but have not been able to put into words regarding the image of God as male. It begs the question of whether or not we are created in God’s image, something we have been taught since childhood: If that is so, how can God not also be female? Even the belief of the rest of us, that “father” is not an image of care and protection for some, did not dissuade one participant from keeping her position that Father is a perfectly appropriate image for God. This image is deeply imbedded in our psyches and ignores the feminine aspect of God’s influence in the world.

This Spirit Sophia, is blowing everywhere, not just in the Catholic Church. In *Defecting in Place* Miriam Therese Winters gave examples of this wind of change present in the hearts of women of other denominations around the globe. It is growing from a small wind in individual hearts to a cyclone which is stirring up the status quo. Women religious who have studied to understand what was happening and suggest alternatives. It is time for it to grow in the hearts of more lay women who are waking up, thinking for ourselves, recognizing the problem, listening to our spirits, finding our voice and claiming our authenticity. We are using that voice to bring about some balance between patriarchy and feminist spirituality in the church. We find ourselves moving from Church to church, from religion to faith.

Some women must leave the Church because their spirits are being crushed, because they feel “disconnected”, misunderstood, feared, and disregarded. It is not unlike those who leave marriages because they are life-taking. They leave to insure our spiritual health and safety.

Women stay in the Church for the same reason feeling called to work toward the end of dualism and the restoration of our faith.

The literature researched, the trust built, and the collaboration among these seven women reflecting on their faith created an electricity, an energy that would not be there in our individual reflections. That energy fueled by the evolution of these questions, challenged and precipitated development and growth in us and among us. To our surprise we discovered we are part of the problem, that our compliance allows such injustice to continue and realized that there is no question that power used to be “with”, not “over” has the potential to overcome the injustice of centuries to return to the faith and values of Jesus. A grace of the study was the realization that it is these values, not his gender that should be our compass. Together we learned that becoming an adult Catholic requires us to move from a passive to an active place in our Church assisting in the ongoing evolution of a religion which is now stagnant, to a faith fed by feminist spirituality and co-created and lived out by women and men together. Equally.

Catholics who embraced the teachings of Vatican II taught our children well and they are rejecting the Church for good reason. We mourn the loss of such amazing spirits yet understand their need to look elsewhere than a Church which by all indications is returning to patriarchal hegemony. Our daughters and sons will not carry forward our complicity. My generation, the generation of Vatican II Catholics, has taught them to

question, to dream, to expect a reverence for and equality of their burgeoning spirits.

They know they are always enough.

If lay women and men do not understand what has been and is happening things will return to the way it was; feminine spirituality will cease having an impact; and the faith fed by Sophia will again disappear. More importantly, each of us, men and women, will not live the life for which we are created but one prescribed by a celibate male hierarchy. Both would be at a terrible cost. It would ignore the gift given us to live to the fullest. Joan Chittister says, “The one obstacle to the worship of the God of grace, the chief barrier to gratitude, lies in a stubborn refusal to grow beyond the limits of our lives.” (2004, p. 224) The Church groans under a patriarchal power which limits that growth for women *and* men. Feminist spirituality is the grace given us to lift that weight. Together we can see things as both/and not either/or. I believe we are we up to the challenge.

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## APPENDIX

### *I'm Not Losing My Faith; I'm Losing My Religion:*

#### **A Collaborative Critical Feminist Study of R.C. Women's Spirituality**

Awareness	Why do some women stay and some leave?
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	What is the difference between spirituality & religion?
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Themes	Question	Question	My Journey
Hegemony	Where is the disconnect?		I'm going to write this thing and surely these "guys" will understand!
Adult Development	Does/how does birth order affect spirituality?		Hmmm...
Transformational Learning	What was the point of no return for you in your faith?	What has your journey been like since?	I don't care what "they" think any more.
Feminist Spirituality	What would you call God if not Father? What would the Church look like if it fed my spirituality?		"We" <u>know</u> how to do this...and it isn't an organization!
Voice	Can we stop asking for permission and be this Church?		"We have a responsibility to be heard...share our gifts"
Power	What will I remember from this experience?	Poems	I need to write, teach, speak, and educate women about their spiritual power.

My questions are about psychological processes and theory, particularly theories in which men's experience stands for all of human experience--theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women's voices. I saw that by maintaining these ways of seeing and speaking about human lives, men were leaving out women, but women were leaving out themselves (p. xiii) Gilligan

