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Navigating Culture, Contradictions and Tensions: The Role of Women Religious in the Cultivation of Democracy

Democracy, Culture & Catholicism: International Research Project Proposal

Abstract

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States has been a major force in sustaining democracy in that country. Its educational systems have cultivated the skills and knowledge necessary for participatory citizenship. Its health care systems and social services have welcomed and sustained all. Its leadership has been an effective voice in public discourse about the common good and it has encouraged American Catholics to join that discussion.

Women religious, particularly sisters, have been a vital part of this force. Since the 18th century, they have worked tirelessly to integrate immigrants and the under privileged into American society. They have been the teachers, the hospital administrators, and social welfare workers and, since mid-20th century, a public voice. Moreover, they have cultivated democratic values within their own congregations and orders; shifting from the European models of strictly authoritarian rule to shared governance within their own organizational structure. However, they have done these things within the larger structure of the Roman Catholic Church whose leadership both internationally and within the U.S. has repeatedly made clear that women religious have limited rights to determine their own governance and only a marginal voice in the determining church policy.

This study examines the contributions that women religious have made to democracy and culture in the United States as well as their efforts to reconcile this knowledge and experience with their struggles for participation and agency within their own organizations as well as within the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Scrutiny of these efforts and seeming contradictions can not only deepen our understanding of the pedagogy of citizenship but can also yield insight into the ability of the Catholic Church to be a witness for democracy and freedom of expression in the United States and throughout the world.

Project Description

Goal and Range

This purpose of this study is to examine the role that women religious played in the pedagogy of citizenship in the United States. It does so within the context of historical tensions between women religious and Catholic hierarchy in the United States and the role that women religious have played and continue to play regarding the fostering of democratic values throughout the world. Thus, the idea of citizenship refers not only to participation in the nation state but also in the church. It asks a basic question: How have women religious taught Americans to be both Catholic and American? The intended outcome is a clearer understanding of what it means to nurture participatory citizenship.

The study will examine the historical contributions of women religious in forming citizens not only through their work in education but also their practices in health care medical and social work. It will also look at the efforts that these women made to prepare themselves as members of a democratic society, paying particular attention to the Sister Formation Movement which began in the 1950s and the systematic efforts made by each order and congregation to respond to the Vatican's call that women religious become more relevant to contemporary society. An important aspect to consider is the fact that these endeavors took place within parallel contexts: the evolving democratic society of the United States and the institutionalized patriarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, this study will consider the resulting tensions between these two cultural spheres and the impact these tensions had on public perception of Church leadership as a convincing voice within American society.

Rationale

Although the education of citizens has long been a stated goal of public education in the United States, not much has been written about the role of private educational institutions, particularly religious-based ones, in this regard. Even less has been written about the part played by other Catholic institutions such as hospitals and settlement houses. Indeed, in the late 19C and early 20C, there was great fear expressed about the influence of Catholic institutions on American values. The irony is that anti-Catholics had a point. Catholic institutions *did* have a great influence but it was never intended to undermine democracy but rather to sustain it. Even a cursory glance U.S. politics, journalism, the judicial system, education, health care, and the arts reveals Catholics as respected leaders. Many, as Dr. Margaret Farley, RSM has observed, started at the "very bottom rung" of the social ladder and were able to advance both themselves and their country because of the education and care they received from Catholic sisters.

The parallel story to this fostering of productive citizens is the evolution of American sisters as citizens themselves, playing an increasingly active role in public discourse and in their own

governance. The most recent and widely known instance of that role is the March 17, 2010 letter sent to Congress by some 60 leaders of women religious orders supporting the health care reform bill that had been publically opposed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. In their book, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters*, Quinonez and Turner look at the impact that American culture had on women religious resulting in “a struggle to reconcile American belonging and religious commitment into one identity.” Part of the struggle involved confronting the male hierarchy of the Church.

Some see U.S. sisters’ resistance to Vatican and local Church dictates as an admirable stance against injustice as well as evidence of the moral agency of women within a patriarchal structure. Others see it as a betrayal of faith. Understanding the nature of such discourse yields insight into what it means to foster leadership, both lay and clergy, in the Church. It will also help to mediate between opposing sides as well as enhance the ability of Church leaders, both male and female, to make effective public argument.

Understanding may also be applicable to dichotomous discourse such as debates over homosexuality, abortion, and women’s rights in which discussion is often framed as irreconcilable dispute. This mind set is very different from what the late Cardinal Bernadine advocated in his call for Catholic Common Ground, asking “What will it take for the Catholic Church in the United States to escape from this partisanship and the paralysis it threatens to engender?” <http://webspaces.webring.com/people/up/pharsea/CommonGround.html>

In a 1996 statement posted on this site, Bernadine argued that his aim ...”was to help Catholics address, creatively and faithfully, questions that are vital if the Church in the United States is going to flourish in the next millennium. At every level, I felt, to move beyond the distrust, the polarization, and the entrenched positions that have hampered our responses.” [Bernadine, Joseph. *Faithful and Hopeful: The Catholic Common Ground Project*,” Washington D.C. 6 September 1996. Presidential Medal of Freedom Address]

Methodology

This study will examine materials related to both the practice and content of teaching in Catholic schools during those years in which Catholic sisters comprised the majority of teachers and administrators as well as similar materials related to the practices of Catholic health care and social service agencies. I will also look at evidence that document transformation within orders and congregations of women religious. Such transformation includes the intentional self-studies done by communities in response to the Vatican’s call for “modernization” and the change growing out of social upheaval such as second wave feminism and the growing role of laity in the Church. Particular attention will be paid to documents related to the Sister Formation Movement, LCWR [Leadership Council of Women Religious], as well as evidence of more specific resistance to patriarchy such as the highly publicized struggle between the Los Angeles IHM community and Cardinal McIntyre and the more recent women’s ordination movement.

Researched documents will community records and statements, scholarly and journalistic analyses, memoirs and interviews. I expect to work with archives such as the Women and Leadership Archives in The Gannon Center, Marquette's special collection archives on Catholic Social Action, and Notre Dame's extensive holding of LCWR materials as well as archives at various orders and communities. I also expect to conduct interviews and attend conferences such as the 2010 Conference on the History of Women Religious.

Contribution to Scholarship

This study builds on my previous research regarding public perception of U.S. women religious and women religious as leadership models [[e.g., *A Question of Habit: the image of women religious in U.S. popular culture* Bren Ortega Murphy, Dir. Film, pending publication] and adds to the contemporary discussion about the legacy and current role of women religious [e.g. Briggs, Kenneth. *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns*. Doubleday, 2006; Coburn, Carol. *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920*. University of North Carolina Press, 1999; Fialka, John. *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2004; Quinonez and Turner. *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters*, Temple University Press 1993].

It will contribute to the ongoing discussion about the nature of women as moral agents, as exemplified in Deniz Kandiyoti's article "Bargaining with Patriarchy," [Kandiyoti *Gender & Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 274-290, 1988] and *Seeking Wholeness: Women Dealing With Abuse of Power in the Catholic Church* [Bouclin, Marie Evans Liturgical Press, 2006]

It also contributes to the academic discussion regarding public discourse [e.g. Rodin, Judith and Stephen Steinberg. *Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Although there is a good deal of extant scholarship in the latter two areas, not much has been written about the intersection of democracy, moral agency and women religious.

Articles based this study will be submitted to one or more of the following journals: *Women and Language*, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Gender and Society*, *Journal of Religion and Society*.

Work Plan

Because the overall project is designed around three distinct phases, this study will proceed as follows:

2010 – Initial research on indicated materials, including travel to various archives. Identification of important interview subjects and subsequent interviews. Participation in the June 2010 Conference on the History of Women Religious. Papers prepared for other academic conferences and eventual publication. Participation in Chicago Workshop.

2011- While the above work continues, I am also interested in comparing the roles of women religious in the United States with the contemporary situation of women religious in formerly Communist countries since these women experienced challenges to both their religious and political lives. At the 2010 HWR conference I will get to see the 2009 documentary *Interrupted Lives: Catholic Sisters Under European Communism-Exploring Truths and Lessons for Religious Life Today* and talk with the film's producers. That should give me a basis of inquiry that I can pursue if I am chosen to go to Lithuania. Since I am scheduled to teach during the Summer Session at the LUC Rome Campus, I will have access to Rome-based sources as well as the possibility of direct collaboration with Dr. Peter Lah, SJ who teaches in Latvia and who has written extensively about changing Catholicism in Europe. If there is a timing conflict between teaching at the LURC and the CCIH Regional Colloquia, I will opt for the Colloquia. Conference papers presented. Articles submitted for academic journal publication.

2012 – Participation in Rome Conference which should generate new conference papers and journal articles.