

1991

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#### Recommended Citation

Farrell, Susan A. (1991). "It's our church, too!": Women's position in the Roman Catholic church today. In *The Social Construction of Gender*, ed. Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell, pp. 227-238. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications.

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## "It's Our Church, Too!": Women's Position in the Catholic Church Today

SUSAN A. FARRELL

How do women go about living in an institution that many find patriarchal, clericalist, bureaucratic, and oppressive? This chapter examines some of the issues facing women in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. The women discussed in this chapter do not want to, and have no intention of, leaving the church. Contrary to prior reform movements these women are asserting that they are the church, too, and have invested much of their lives in living out what to them is the gospel message. Living and working in great tension between what the institution is, and what they envision it could and should be, Catholic feminists are searching for alternative models of church while maintaining their identity as Roman Catholics. These women, theologians, ethicists, sisters, and laywomen, have taken to heart and are trying to bring to fulfillment the message of the church itself, declared in the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium at Spes*):

*Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact. . . . With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that funda-*

*mental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men. (Abbott 1966, pp. 207, 227-28)*

The task that these women see for themselves is radical reform from within the church, without being coopted or so marginalized that they have no impact on the institution.

### WOMEN'S POSITION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TODAY

According to Wallace (1988), Roman Catholic women are creating a new social reality which "represents a shift from their passive and subservient roles vis-à-vis the clergy to a more active participation in the life of the Church" (p. 25). Influenced by the secular women's movement in which many are active, Roman Catholic women want and are demanding more participation at higher levels of the organizational church. More and more women, both lay and religious, are filling administrative positions, jobs that only ordained clergymen used to do. Although these opportunities for women in some measure come from the current shortage of priests, women have also been encouraged by the Second

Vatican Council's call in the early 1960s for greater involvement of the laity in the day-to-day life of the church (Abbott 1966).

However, women's continued advancement and increased participation at higher organizational levels is blocked by church practice and discipline that does not allow the ordination of women to the priesthood. All top-level positions of authority and decision-making in the Roman Catholic Church are held by ordained celibate men, which also effectively removes married men from these positions. In essence, as the *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1976) states and has been repeated by Pope John Paul II, women cannot be ordained because they cannot act *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ) because they are not biological men (1988, pp. 89–90). Thus, the hierarchical structure of the church and its division of labor is based very clearly on a biologized concept of sex and gender.

The organizational structure of Roman Catholicism reveals what Acker (1991) states is often hidden in modern bureaucratic organizations, a negative view of sexuality that is linked to misogyny and heterosexism. According to Acker, organizations are "gendered processes in which both gender and sexuality have been obscured through a gender-neutral, asexual discourse" (p. 163). The ideology underlying the Roman Catholic organizational structure that denies ordination to women and also represses men's sexuality becomes the example par excellence of Acker's point that "gender is a constitutive element in organizational logic" (p. 168). Obscuring sexuality also hides human procreation and "helps to reproduce the underlying gender relations" (p. 172).

#### FEMINIST SCHOLARS' CHALLENGE

Feminist scholars in Christianity and Roman Catholicism have illustrated the origins and results of the patriarchal religious ideology upon which the hierarchy of Roman Catholicism is

constructed. According to Schüssler Fiorenza (1984):

*Much feminist theological writing accepts a two-fold pre-supposition: that the root of women's oppression is dualistic thought or patriarchalism as a mind set or projection, and that monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity constitute the bedrock of Western patriarchalism. This hierarchical pattern of Western society, culture, and religion is characterized by the split between subject-object, superior-inferior, spirituality-carnality, life-death, mind-body, men-women.... They have fashioned an absolute transcendent God in the image of men and declared women "the other" who cannot image or represent God. (pp. 296–7)*

Schüssler Fiorenza is summarizing the work done by many Jewish, Christian, and post-Christian feminist theologians and philosophers who have uncovered the patriarchal roots of Judeo-Christianity and the Judeo-Christian roots of patriarchy.<sup>1</sup> In this androcentric ethical discourse, as it has been institutionalized in Christianity and the Roman Catholic church, women have not been acknowledged as full moral agents by men. This view is based on a patriarchal interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis.

Post-Christian feminist Mary Daly insists that since genesis stories were written by men and their conception of God is irrevocably androcentric, they cannot be useable for and by women (1973, 1978, 1984). Based on this conclusion, Daly herself left the Roman Catholic Church believing the Judeo-Christian tradition to be intrinsically patriarchal and beyond redemption. Other Christian and Roman Catholic feminists, however, are trying to reclaim the past, arguing that religious mythology has been subverted by men to serve their interests. It is a feminist project to deconstruct and then reconstruct a past to make it into a useable present and to transform it for a liberated future for women in the church (Fiorenza 1983, pp. 28–32).

Trible (1978) gives an intriguing alternate interpretation of Genesis. According to Tribble, the creation stories are hierarchically told, going from the simplest to the most complex

creatures. Woman, being the last created, is the pinnacle of creation. She also makes note of wrongly translated names and genders. "Adam" actually means "humankind," not "man." The full quote is "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion (Genesis 1:26) (her emphasis, 1978, p. 18). Jewish midrash (a collection of interpretations of and commentaries on Biblical texts, especially those written during the first ten centuries C.E.) offers a variety of creation stories that provide feminists with an alternative to the patriarchally accused and condemned Eve. Called Lilith stories, Plaskow (1974) retells one version that has Adam complaining to God that Lilith, his first wife, does not obey him, she is an "uppity woman" (p. 341). He wants another more tractable woman. God complies. He gives Adam Eve and Lilith leaves the garden. She roams outside the garden wall, calling to Eve. When Eve climbs the garden wall and meets her, Lilith recounts her story: "They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them. . . . And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together" (pp. 342-3).

These scholars are transforming theological discourse using a well-honed feminist method: the experience of oppression discovered through the sharing of life stories. Welch (1985) describes this method as being simultaneously a way of doing research and an act of resistance:

*This politicization gives women the courage to persist in resistance, recognizing that their difficulties have not only an individual basis but a social and political basis as well. (pp. 41-2)*

Using Daly's vision of a community of sisterhood as a locus of "creative resistance," Welch says that this experience of sisterhood is

*an experience of resistance and liberation, an affirmation of an identity that is different from that*

*imposed by the dominant patriarchal social structures. The experience of resistance is itself a denial of the necessity of patriarchy; it is a moment of freedom, the power to embody momentarily an alternative identity. This affirmation serves as the ground for political resistance to social structures. (1985, pp. 41-2)*

Linking this experience of oppression with a critique of mainstream religion offered by liberation theology, Welch goes on to describe the task of the feminist theologian in the church:

*The philosopher or theologian of resistance then brings the skills of his or her training in analysis and synthesis to bear on the power relations manifest in oppression...an analysis of the concrete mechanisms of exclusion and domination.... In theology, commitment and reflection have led to... works that describe specific histories of oppression, criticize the role of the church and theology in that oppression, and offer alternative interpretations of the gospel and ecclesia [church]. (1985, pp. 42-3)*

It is this understanding of their role as resisters, subversives, and, ultimately, transformers of a patriarchal church that sustains feminists who choose to remain in the institution.

#### FEMINIST ETHICISTS

One group that has maintained this embattled position of working from within are Roman Catholic feminist ethicists. Choosing to focus on sexual ethics, they highlight the sense of struggle and conflict between official church discourse and feminist discourse. Even in the larger society, sexuality is a "contested zone" (Weeks [1985] 1989, p. 4), but it is especially so in Roman Catholicism. Feminist ethicists are engaging in a struggle for meaning in a discourse that men have dominated for centuries.

The first task of Christian feminist theologians and ethicists was the critique of ethics and moral theology that revealed its androcentric and patriarchal bias (see especially Andolsen, Gudorf, and Pellauer 1985; Daly 1978; Fiorenza 1983; Harrison 1985; Heyward 1989; Ruether 1975, 1983). Using Foucault's (1979) insight that sexuality is also a locus of power,

Christian feminist ethicists have linked the institutional church's sexual repressiveness and misogyny with the question of women's ordination.<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic Church has also made sexual issues, particularly abortion, a litmus test for orthodoxy and evidence of loyalty to Rome. Outstanding male theologians such as Charles Curran, Matthew Fox, Hans Küng, and Edward Schillebeeckx have been censured, had teaching licenses revoked, and been silenced (a Vatican discipline that prohibits the person in question from speaking or writing about a particular subject, usually because the theologian has disagreed with, or is challenging, the official Vatican position). These sanctions have usually been invoked over areas of disagreement concerning either sexual ethics or perceived support for increased participation by women in the ministry, especially ordination.

Understanding the nature of the church as a complex social organization can help contextualize the ethical discourse and why it is perceived as a threat to the hierarchy. The Roman Catholic Church fits Weber's (1978) model of a hierarchy:

*A "hierocratic organization" is an organization which enforces its order through psychic coercion by distributing or denying religious benefits.... A compulsory hierocratic organization will be called "church" insofar as its administrative staff claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of hierocratic coercion. (p. 54)*

In the Roman Catholic Church, religious benefits, for example, grace, mainly come through the sacraments. Except for baptism, only ordained priests can administer the sacraments. Technically, in matrimony, the couple administers the sacrament to each other, but a priest must be present to witness it and bless the couple, which is really the distribution of a special grace. Despite some relaxation of administration because of the shortage of priests, an ordained minister is preferred for administering the sacraments.

Because all women and most men are excluded, a small minority of Roman Catholic men do indeed possess a monopoly over the dispensation of the sacraments and the graces that accompany them and, ultimately, the salvation that all Catholics desire.

Using their own judgment, priests can also deny the sacraments. For example, in California, a Catholic woman running for public office was denied communion because of her pro-choice stand on abortion. A few years ago, a young woman was denied confirmation because her mother worked in a women's health clinic where abortions were performed. Excommunication is the ultimate sanction that can be brought to bear against Roman Catholics who disobey. There is only one case where excommunication is automatic. According to the new code of canon law, "A person who procures a successful abortion incurs an automatic excommunication" (Canon 1398, Canon Law Society 1983).

Clearly, punishment is more likely to be meted out for "sins" related to sexual than other practices because no other act incurs automatic excommunication. Women, and men who support them, are also more likely to be targets of sanctions and reprimands. The signers of the *New York Times* (October 7, 1984) advertisement advocating discussion and a "diversity of opinions regarding abortion" in the Roman Catholic community, especially members of religious orders directly under Vatican authority, were special targets of a campaign of harassment. Those priests, sisters, and brothers of religious communities who did not formally retract, or whose religious communities did not do so for them, "were penalized by segments of the institutional church" (*Declaration of Solidarity*, 1986, p. 21).

Laypersons not associated with an official Roman Catholic institution were not so hard-pressed, because it was difficult for the hierarchy either to locate them or to sanction them. A number of laywomen I interviewed felt that their "lowly status" has a positive side in that

it allows them to teach or function as ethical practitioners in a way not readily observable by the institutional church. They therefore believe they have a more subversive role. Women who have no official standing in the institutional church, in contrast to nuns and sisters, are outside many of the watchdog agencies of the Vatican, such as the Sacred Congregation for Religious Communities. Although their lives may be irrelevant to the church except for their so-called biological function of procreation, their usefulness as teachers, pastoral assistants, counselors, and the myriad voluntary positions they fill makes them necessary to the functioning of the church. From these positions, they can quietly subvert the dominant discourse with little fear of incurring sanctions.

Canon law is like the U.S. Constitution; it is the core of the laws and regulations that govern the life of the institutional church. However, because the ruling body of the church is the Curia, which is made up only of celibate clergymen, women and laymen have no input into creating, changing, or maintaining these laws. The monopoly is not simply one of an elite class based on economics or education. It is also clearly based on gender and sexual practices. Laws relating to sexual behavior are rooted largely in the "naturalness" of heterosexuality. Heterosexual intercourse is regulated by limiting its practice to the confines of the social institution of marriage and mainly for the purposes of procreation and regulation of concupiscence (strong sexual desire). Women, and men associated with women in sexual relationships, i.e., heterosexual marriage (which for the institutional church is the only acceptable sexual relationship), are barred from ordination and therefore from the ruling class of the institution.

The roots linking authority and power with sexist and heterosexist ideology go back to struggles with Gnosticism and Manicheism in the early history of Christianity, the influence of stoicism on the early church fathers,

especially Augustine, and the consolidation of church power in the Holy Roman Empire (Katchadourian 1989). According to Heyward (1989)

*The Council of Elvira (Spain), at which for the first time an explicitly antisexual code was made law for western Christians, was held in 309 C.E. . . . [T]he Christian church still operates on the basis of this same antisexual dualism, which is in effect, an antifemale dualism. From the second century on, the church had portrayed sex as something pertaining to women and as evil, "the devil's gateway." This attitude, for the first time, is canonized at the dawn of the era in which the church's social, political, and economic power is inaugurated. (pp. 42, 44)*

Based on the image of Eve as seductive temptress, Christian theologians have associated women with sexuality and viewed both with deep suspicion and fear. Throughout the history of Christianity and Roman Catholicism, theologians, moralists, and ethicists have inveighed against women as corrupt, weak, lustful, evil "daughters of Eve" and to be avoided at all costs. Debates raged over whether women were fully human, possessed of rational souls, or capable of redemption. In Augustine's view, women were unfortunately needed for procreation, which seemed to be the only reason for their existence (Prusak 1977, p. 8). Thomas Aquinas concurred, and Roman Catholic theology and ethics has had to try to redeem women by concentrating on their biological function (Daly [1968] 1975, 1973, 1978; Osiek 1977; Tavard 1977; Quistlund 1977). Using Mary, Jesus' mother, as a counterpoint, the church fathers and scholastics resolved women into dualistic images: virgin-mother or whore—the latter a negative image, the former an improbable achievement.

Feminist ethicists seeking to transform the discourse are up against an ideological authoritarianism wherein sexual ethics are based in biological determinism and constructed on a belief in "natural law." In addition, as illustrated in anti-choice rhetoric, the discourse is deontological: it is more concerned with

duties, the minimal threshold for conformity, absolute values, and universalization of standards, laws, and guidelines than with consequences of actions, extenuating circumstances, and social contexts. According to its major proponent, Immanuel Kant, *deontological ethics* consists of the will to do one's duty for duty's sake, which... is the essence of human morality (Lake 1986, p. 480 and footnote 6, p. 480). A concrete example of deontological behavior is conformity to moral rules, for example, the Ten Commandments. According to Lake, "In a deontological ethical system, it is by definition right to obey the rules and wrong to disobey them" (p. 482). Rules and laws are stripped of their historical and social context and universalized. It is an abstract and absolute ethic which does not ask about consequences (Weber 1946, p. 120). There are no people, no contextualized lived experience, nothing that takes into account the "average deficiencies of people" (p. 121).

#### FEMINIST ETHICAL DISCOURSE

Since issues of sexuality have become the testing sites of sin and error, feminist ethical discourse presents a major challenge to traditional religious institutions, especially the Catholic Church. In an ironic way, women have been and continue to be the "objects" of both sides of this discourse. For traditional male theologians, it is women's sexuality that must be controlled, restrained, constrained, regulated, and harnessed for procreative reasons. Men's sexuality gets out of hand only because of women: Either they tempt men or they fail to satisfy them and thus are responsible when men lose control (Weeks [1986] 1989, p. 32, 38-9). Encyclicals, Vatican declarations, and official instructions concerning sexuality have been directed primarily toward women's sexual behavior and their responsibilities in marriage and child-rearing. Frequently addressed to bishops, theologians, pastors, and other official churchmen, they exhort them to

keep "the faithful" faithful. In matters of sexuality, the burden of conformity is on women, who fail as wives and mothers when they do not conform to the church's teachings.

John Paul II's recent (1988) encyclical, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, is a prime example of patriarchal institutional discourse that bases the official church's understanding of women and sexuality on a socially constructed belief in biologically determined gender roles, especially surrounding parenthood:

*Scientific analysis fully confirms that the very physical constitution of women is naturally disposed to motherhood—conception, pregnancy and giving birth—which is a consequence of the marriage union with the man. At the same time this corresponds to the psychophysical structure of women.... Motherhood as a human fact and phenomenon is fully explained on the basis of the truth about the person. Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift: "I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord" (Genesis 4:1). (pp. 64-5, his emphasis)*

John Paul's underlying belief is that mothers are more important in raising children than fathers are and that there is no connection between men's procreative role in conception and their social role as fathers; only mothers are socially defined by their procreative role:

*Although both of them together are parents of their child, the woman's motherhood constitutes a special "part" in this shared parenthood, the most demanding part. Parenthood—even though it belongs to both—is realized much more fully in the woman, especially in the prenatal period. It is the woman who "pays" directly for this shared generation, which literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul. It is therefore necessary that the man be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes a special debt to the woman. No program of "equal rights" between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into account. (1998, p. 65, his emphasis)*

Schüssler Fiorenza, in an effort to refute this essentialist notion of women, agrees with

feminist social theorists such as Katz Rothman (1989) about the social construction of motherhood. She quotes Judith Plaskow:

*nature and motherhood are human constructs and institutions, on the one hand, and . . . women's physicality is a "resource rather than a destiny," and the ground "of all we make ourselves to be" on the other hand. (Fiorenza 1984, pp. 297-8)*

The ideology expressed by John Paul II is also the basis for church laws prohibiting contraception, abortion, new reproductive technologies, and homosexuality, as well as "camouflage (for) the issue of power" (Quistlund 1977, p. 265). It is an ideology that, despite reference to "scientific analysis" and "anthropological truths," still remains androcentric. This official discourse refers to "eternal truths" taught by the male *magisterium* to whom they have been revealed. It is not open to discussion nor can a diversity of opinion be tolerated. Challenge would upset the natural order of creation—two complementary "sexes" with God-given roles. Woman-centered theology and ethics would threaten the power structure because questioning the "natural order" also questions man's superior place in the social order, and thereby the ownership of truth and authority by celibate clergymen.

It is precisely this ideology that the discourse of feminist ethicists *does* challenge. In their alternative view of women and men, gender identities and roles and sexual identities and practices are constituted out of the centrality of women's lived experience. Analysis of women's experiences brings to light a crucial component of the social construction of feminist ethics: women's experiences are not homogeneous:

*Women's lives are very different. Among differences that seem most significant are the following: Some women are mothers; others are not. Some women come from upper-class backgrounds; others from the middle class; still others from the working class or from poverty. Some are lesbian; some, heterosexual. Women are Black, White, Native Amer-*

*ican, Asian-American, or Latina. Women are Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, adherents to other traditional world religions, followers of the Goddess, or nonreligious. Women have very different work experiences as homemakers, clerical workers, service workers, factory operatives, managers, or professionals. If feminist ethics is to be based on the experience of all women, then such differences in experience must be acknowledged and incorporated into feminist theory. (Andolsen, Gudorf, and Pel-lauer 1985, p. xv)*

This statement summarizes the quality of feminist ethics: constant re-creation in the crucible of the diversity of women's experiences. Unlike the institutional church, feminist ethics recognizes women as moral agents who are capable of making their own choices—even if they are not the best ones, even if they make mistakes. It also understands those choices as made in reference to a particular community: family, neighborhood, workplace.

Carol Robb, a feminist ethicist of "resistance," lays out a framework for a feminist ethics that starts with "reflection upon very concrete situations" (1985, p. 213). She notes that defining the problem is a political act. Like Gilligan (1982) she believes that women's morality and ethics cannot be tested with prefabricated, androcentric dilemmas, since women reconstruct these dilemmas for themselves and create inventive ways to solve them. Robb goes on to enumerate the guidelines she believes are important for "doing ethics." Ethicists must gather data about the historical situation and context; they must analyze the roots of oppression; they must uncover loyalties—community ties as well as political ones; and finally a theory of values has to be clarified.

#### A FEMINIST THEORY OF VALUES

The issue of variance has become problematic for feminists. Various models for a value system have been proposed, creating heated debates not only within the feminist community



but within the ethical community at large.<sup>3</sup> Robb (1985), for example, asks if "feminists have claim to any values independent of either a theory that biology is determinative, or a commitment to social justice shared with others" (p. 215), e.g., commitments to racial or economic justice.

Ethics generally recognizes three modes: teleological, deontological (discussed earlier), and situation-response. The *teleological mode* identifies "goals toward which people should aspire," acknowledging "gradations of right and wrong." Contingencies and consequences may mitigate an act that is formally proscribed by "interjecting subjective interpretations in uncertain circumstances" (Lake 1986, pp. 480-1, 486). Robb (1985) claims that "feminist ethics is done largely in the teleological mode, when the understanding of teleology allows for inclusion of the relational mode" (1985, p. 216). The *situation-response mode* "holds that there are no a priori right or wrong actions. Rather, moral value is determined only as a result of human choice in concrete situations.... [S]ituationism is highly individualistic, emphasizing the constitutive role of human choice in ethical determinations." (Lake 1986, p. 486).<sup>4</sup>

Referring to Daly, Robb agrees that feminist ethics is "metaethical." Setting it up as opposed to conventional ethics, Daly states that:

*radical feminist metaethics is of a deeper intuitive type than "ethics." The latter, generally written from one of several (but basically the same) patriarchal perspectives, works out of hidden agendas concealed in the texture of language, buried in mythic reversals which control "logic" most powerfully because unacknowledged. Thus for theologians and philosophers, Eastern and Western, and particularly for ethicists, woman-identified women do not exist. The metaethics of radical feminism seeks to uncover the background of such logic.... [I]t is, of course, a new discipline that "deals critically" with nature, structure, and the behavior of ethics and ethicists. (Daly 1978, p. 13)*

With Daly, Robb reminds us that feminist ethics is critical and a discourse of resistance, but

she maintains that its teleology, or relational mode, must be inclusive, which distinguishes it from simple utilitarianism (1985, p. 217) and situation ethics, both of which emphasize the individual, leaving out the community and social context of the moral agents. Robb emphasizes the importance of inclusive relationality, while "granting the complexities of this method" (1985, p. 217, my emphasis), "making the connections" among the family, the community, and the workplace. Inclusive relationality means taking into account the social and cultural differences among women and includes the economic dimension in moral decision-making, especially the way it often constrains women's choices (Harrison 1984, 1985). Gilligan has characterized women's morality as an "ethic of responsibility" (1982); Noddings (1984) calls it an "ethic of caring."

Feminist ethics criticizes the notion of "the moral agent as dispassionate and disengaged...for its failure to recognize the social foundation of self" (Robb 1985, p. 217). Building on Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's moral dilemmas and moral decision-making, Robb and other feminists (Harding, 1986; Parlee, 1979) reject what they see as an androcentric notion of moral agent who stands outside a social context. The construction of an idealized human moral agent has been shown to actually mean "man" in its particular sense and not the so-called inclusive sense which male ethicists, theologians, and philosophers maintain is what they "really mean" (Andolsen, Gudorf, and Pellauer 1985, p. xxii).

The detached moral agent ignores, hides, and makes invisible the inequality between men and women (Robb 1985). Ignoring social context and relations within a family, community, or workplace limits women's moral agency:

*In this sense, the economic dependency of women in the family, the inequality of pay and promotion in the labor force tied to women's role as child-bearer and child-rearer, the possibility of sexual harassment or physical abuse from a stranger or an intimate, and further, in psychological terms, the*

*tendency toward lack of ego differentiation in women's personality formation, are all factors impinging upon women's sense of self which can be autonomous confronting or defining ethical situations. (Robb 1985, p. 218)*

Nevertheless, according to Robb, motivation will make us know the right thing and gets us to do it. This willingness to "do the right thing" begins "when women become engaged in collective efforts of self-definition. . . . [they create] an energy which overcomes or at least mitigates against alienation between the will and the right" (Robb 1985, p. 218).

#### A DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE

Repeatedly, feminist ethicists return to community and relationships as the grounding for both resistance and revisioning. Roman Catholic feminists understand church to be a community of believers for whom "there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female" (Galatians 3:28). They see their role within the institutional church as prophetic: calling the church to a more faithful living out of the gospel message which they see as nonhierarchical and inclusive, not exclusive and hierarchically bureaucratic. Schüssler Fiorenza (1979) articulates a feminist model of church based on Jesus' exhortation to his followers "to call no man 'father' . . . nor should you be called 'leader'" (Matthew 23:9-11). Initiated by a lay Catholic organization, "Call to Action," and supported by the Women's Ordination Conference, a recent advertisement, "A Call for Reform in the Catholic Church," linked abuse of authority and power with sexism, clericalism, racism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, and classism (Call to Action 1990). Lernoux (1989) sees various reform movements as aligned with liberation theology as does Welch (1995). Lernoux sees all, as the subtitle of her last book put it, as "the struggle for world Catholicism."

Roman Catholic feminists refuse to leave or be put out of the church. Instead, they are fighting from within, creating resistance and

alternative voices. Feminist ethicist Mary Hunt (1990) envisions a coalition of the disenfranchised groups who are attempting to reform the institution. The most active are what she calls "the women-church groups" (p. 3). *Women-church* is a term used to describe a movement rather than a single organization. Comprised of several national organizations like the Women's Ordination Conference, Conference for Catholic Lesbians, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER—Mary Hunt is a codirector), and Catholics for a Free Choice, Women-church is also made up of local feminist base communities which function as alternatives to parish churches.

Women-church is a loose women-centered alliance, a way of saying that "we are religious while not institutionally affiliated" (Hunt 1990, p. 3). Although eclectic enough to include other religious traditions, many remain Christian in their orientation and spirituality. What they have rejected is not the basic Christian message but its present institutional embodiment. According to Hunt, of all the lay-led groups in the coalition, Women-church groups, though far from perfect, "show the greatest promise in terms of new models of leadership. . . . [S]uch women-led groups are accomplishing goals and developing organizations that embody a commitment to women's empowerment." (1990, p. 3-4)

For Mary Hunt and other Roman Catholic feminists, the revisioning of the church is the creation of a new moral community which is inclusive yet diverse. In their attempt to deconstruct the institution and reconstruct a new community, they feel that they are also part of the larger feminist project of human liberation. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983) sees Women-church, or what she calls the *ekklesia of women*, as

*overcoming all the structural-patriarchal dualisms between Jewish and Christian women, lay-women and nun-women, homemakers and career women, between active and contemplative, between Protestant and Roman Catholic women, between married and*

single women, between physical and spiritual mothers, between heterosexual and lesbian women, between church and the world, the sacred and the secular. However, we will overcome these dualisms only through and in solidarity with all women and in a catholic sisterhood that transcends all patriarchal ecclesiastical divisions. . . . It must be lived in a prophetic commitment, compassionate solidarity, consistent resistance, affirmative celebration, and in grassroots organizations of ekklesia of women. (p. 349)

### CONCLUSION

Creating a moral community that is viable for both women and men is an important aspect of feminist ethics. It is also a growing concern for social scientists trying to find moral consensus in an increasingly pluralistic world. Sociologist Alan Wolfe sees the moral order being created in the actual discourse and process of attempting to arrive at a consensus. The ethical and moral community and its norms

are created by and within the struggle for shared meanings; they are socially constructed by the challenge of marginalized groups: "for society as a whole moral questions are raised whenever an outcast group seeks entry, no matter what the reasons for its liminal status—social class, gender, sexual preference, geography, or color" (Wolfe 1989, p. 216).

Liminality, uniting at the threshold, is certainly what women have experienced in the Roman Catholic Church as well as in the larger society. Their moral and ethical discourse has taken place at the edge of the dominant ideological discourse. These women perceive themselves as challenging the institutional discourse in order to transform not only the discourse but the institution itself. They are in the midst of creating the "new social reality" (Wallace 1988) so that a new ethical vision can emerge, an ethical vision that will transform the institution of which they are an integral part.

### NOTES

1. See Buckley 1978; Christ and Plaskow 1979; Daly [1968], 1975, 1973, 1978, 1984; Fiorenza 1983, 1984; Plaskow and Christ 1989; Ruether 1974, 1975, 1983, 1986; Swidler and Swidler 1977 and the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* are a few examples of the ever-increasing amount of scholarship in this field.

2. See Swidler and Swidler (1977) for an extensive and scholarly commentary by the leading theologians and scholars in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church.

3. See works by Cooley, Farmer, and Ross 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Habermas 1984, 1987; Harrison 1985, Hoagland 1988, Kittay and Meyers 1987; MacIntyre 1984; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1984; Whitbeck 1984; Wolfe 1989.

4. See Lake (1986) for a discussion of the teleological mode versus the deontological with regard to the abortion debate.

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