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WOMEN-CHURCH AND EGALITARIANISM: REVISIONING "IN CHRIST THERE ARE NO MORE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE"

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Introduction

Roman Catholic women are creating a community within the institutional church called Women-Church. They are creating an organization using feminist perspectives and feminist organizational principles. Examination of the origins, ideology, organization, and strategies for change of Women-Church allows the following questions to be asked and analyzed from a feminist perspective: Is Women-Church a feminist organization? If so, how well are they succeeding? Through interviews and analysis of Women-Church documents and the writings and speeches of individual Women-Church members, I examine their claims and the actualization of their egalitarian ideology in their organizational structure. I also analyze the extent to which Women-Church may or may not realize their vision of a community of equality and justice as part of a social movement for transformation of the Roman Catholic Church.

As a practicing Roman Catholic woman involved in various groups that make up Women-Church, I am what Merton calls an "insider." As a sociologist engaged in participant-observer research on feminist ethicists in the Roman Catholic church and their contribution to the Women-Church movement as well as their impact on church ideology and sexual ethics, I am an "outsider" as well (Merton 1972). This stance allows for an in-depth illustration of a particular case study that may "have a wide range of application" (Oberschall 1973, p. x), and contribute in a meaningful way to the study of the feminist movement and feminist organizations.

My particular focus in this paper is to analyze Women-Church as a feminist organization based on Patricia Y. Martin's analysis in her article "Rethinking Feminist Organizations" (1990). According to Martin:

an organization is feminist if it meets any one of the following criteria: (a) has a feminist ideology; (b) has feminist guiding values; (c) has feminist goals; (d) produces feminist outcomes; (e) was founded during the women's movement as part of the women's movement (including one or more of its submovements, e.g., the feminist self-help health movement, the violence against women movement. (1990, p. 185)

Both from the perspective of Women-Church members themselves and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church, these characteristics put the two groups at odds. These feminist Roman Catholic women understand themselves to be the "loyal opposition" or, as many of them refer to their role, "prophetic voices" in the church. In Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's words, Women-Church or the ekklesia of women is a

new model of church . . . lived in prophetic commitment, compassionate solidarity, consistent resistance, affirmative celebration. and in grassroots organizations . . . a counter term to patriarchy. (1983, p. 349)¹

Another way of analyzing feminist organizations is presented by Mary Fainsod Katzenstein in her work, "Discursive Politics and Feminist Activism in the Catholic Church" (1995). Katzenstein argues that Women-Church is engaged in the politics of "meaning-making." Women-Church members "seek to reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices" of the institutional church (1995, p. 35). She also notes that since discursive politics rely primarily, although not exclusively, on language, the "linguistic construction" of the term "Women-Church" is particularly significant (p. 41). However, as Foucault rightly insists, language is not merely words, they are political acts as well. The production of discourse especially oppositional discourses reveal institutional practices as well as ideologies (Foucault 1972, 1973, 1980a, 1981). This is a notion very much in accord with the feminist concept that "the personal is the political." Women-Church is no mere linguistic construct but also an organization and a social movement (Farrell 1992).

A recent issue of *Conscience*, the official publication of Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), an organizational member of Women-Church, stated that Women-Church "is feminist in commitment and global in outreach (1995, p. 3), underscoring the organization's diversity as well as its feminism. The editorial staff of *Conscience* summarized Women-Church's feminist ideology in an article entitled "Equal is as Equal Does." In a section subtitled "A New Vision of Catholic Social Justice," the writers laid out several principles outlined briefly here:

1. a feminist anthropology rests on the radical equality of women and men in community
2. diversity of creation implies differences and the task of a "discipleship of equals" is to hold all of this difference in common, encouraging it and making the world a welcoming place for it.

3. women are multifaceted. Reproduction is important but only one of women's functions. Because it has been used as a basis for discrimination against women, special priority must be given to women's health needs.
4. community rather than family is our programmatic focus.
5. we strive to dismantle hierarchical structures and end discrimination . . . we encourage change in attitudes, behaviors, and laws to secure our common well-being. Our reverence is for all earth, as well as for all its peoples.

Based on this statement, Women-Church's ideology includes the global vision of the larger feminist movement. I think that the writings of Women-Church theologians have reflected this global vision for some time (see the Hunt and Kissling interviews in Milhaven 1987, Stan's interview of Kissling in *Ms*, 1995; Ruether 1975, 1986, 1992; Weaver 1985). The organizing aspects of Women-Church such as the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), Women's Alliance of Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER), and CFCC have reached out to Europe and the developing nations to help develop Women-Church groups that reflect the needs of women around the world (see "WATER in Europe," 1995, p. 6 for one recent example). As described below, Women-Church had a strong presence at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing as well.

WOMEN-CHURCH HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION

Not simply one organization, Women-Church is actually a coalition of a variety of feminist groups and liberationist movements in the Roman Catholic church and tradition that are currently challenging the institutional church. Feminist women in the church want equality and a church that is nonhierarchical and nonbureaucratic, mirroring the community described in the Acts of the Apostles, based on the baptismal formula found in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, and Jesus' own exhortation to "call no man father" (Fiorenza 1979). "The task that these women see for themselves is radical reform from within, without being coopted or so marginalized that they have no impact on the institution" (Farrell 1991, p. 338). Women-Church is both a social movement seeking to change church ideology and presents an alternative model for being church as it challenges the present institutional arrangements which exclude women as well as laymen from positions of authority. Women-Church is simultaneously challenging the structure and the ideology that upholds the structure. Both the development of an explicit feminist ideological dimension as well the goals of the organization fulfill two conditions for Women-Church to be considered a feminist organization according to Martin's framework.

In order to accomplish their aims, feminist Roman Catholic women began a process of coalition building, the first of which made WOC possible. Women in religious orders had the education and material resources as well as the organization-

al structure to rally, publicize, and support the fledgling movement. Paralleling the secular women's movement (which fulfills another characteristic that Martin uses to define a feminist organization), the origins and continued structure of Women-Church is represented by both highly organized groups such as religious orders and numerous local grass-roots groups such as women's parish-based study groups (Freeman 1979; Martin 1990). Mary Hunt describes the Women-Church coalition as lay-led (sisters and nuns are, by canonical definition, laity not clergy), embodying a commitment to women's empowerment, autonomous from the institutional church in varying degrees, yet

each sector distinguishes itself as church, especially as Catholic, by celebration. Sacramental life continues unabated in these circles with Eucharist (usually without an ordained celebrant) as the common bond. (1990a, p.4).

These Women-Church groups illustrate what Jo Freeman calls "a decentralized, segmented network of autonomous groups . . . held together by an often tenuous network of personal contacts and feminist publications" (1979, p. 168).

In addition, the grassroots Women-Church groups often use parish facilities for meetings. While participating in parish life, laywomen publicize their existence and purpose through parish announcements and publications. They share a Christian Catholic culture that frequently is reinforced by a life-long education in the Catholic school system as well as continued participation in local parishes. Simultaneously, they are challenging the clerical monopoly of the institutional church and transforming institutional structures at the grassroots level. Calling it unobtrusive mobilization, Mary Katzenstein concludes that even in the most authoritarian and patriarchal institutions like the military and the Roman Catholic Church "activists have strategized to recreate and sustain gender consciousness" (1990, p. 36). It is precisely this kind of social change and transformation of consciousness that Ruth Wallace sees taking place as women not only redefine ideology but begin moving into social roles in the church previously held by celibate men. Women in pastoral roles begin to breakdown the clerical monopoly constitutive of the hierocratic structure of the Roman Catholic Church (Wallace 1992).

Building on the grass-roots approach, Women-Church is the result of a process of the growing collaboration of groups on a continuum from "local feminist base communities" to highly organized religious orders with institutional resources (Hunt, 1990b, p. 2). Since they are a coalition without a formal hierarchy, they "share a common culture but are politically autonomous" (Freeman 1979, p. 169). Women-Church is actually, an umbrella organization made up of individual members and a loose confederation of Roman Catholic women's groups working for various changes in the institutional church (this is a characterization also used by Katzenstein, 1995, p. 41). These groups often formed the impetus for, and in some cases provided individuals for the informal leadership of Women-Church. Almost

all the following groups have members who participate in Women-Church either as individuals or through their group's membership. For instance, the leaders of the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), and Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) serve on the steering committee of Women-Church. If you are a member of any of these organizations, you also participate in Women-Church.

Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) goes to the heart of the matter by linking freedom of conscience with sexual rights, challenging the hierarchy's interpretation on abortion, contraception, and new reproductive technologies. CFFC links all of these issues to the oppression of women and their exclusion from the hierarchy. WOC has moved even further in this direction, as indicated by my interviews with its members and leadership and my analysis of its major national conferences. They are calling for a transformed priesthood in a transformed church. The Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) provides a good example of what Women-Church is and what it is striving to become. WATER is a grassroots organization that draws together women interested in creating their own spirituality and rituals from a woman-centered perspective but in community with other women. Leaders of WATER operate primarily as consultants, preferring not to dictate a universal formula for all women to use. Theology and ethics are derived from the women's experiences with each other in their communities. Again, no preset formulas or dogmatic pronouncements are imposed on the women. WATER strives to maintain the grassroots momentum learned from the feminist and liberation theology movements.

Women-Church has made connections with Catholic social justice groups such as Call to Action (a Catholic lay group whose aim is to democratize the church), the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church (ARCC) and the Center for Concern and the Quixote Center (which focus on Catholic concerns over U.S. involvement in Central and South America linking religious liberation movements with political liberation). Links have also been forged with CORPUS (an organization that supports married priests). Members of DIGNITY (an organization of gay and lesbian Catholics) also participate in Women-Church. Most important, many religious orders remain active both through participation and making resources available for Women-Church. Association with *Las Hermanas* (a Catholic Hispanic women's group) extends the coalition beyond U.S. borders. Mary Hunt, co-founder and co-director of WATER as well as a Women-Church board member, notes the diversity as well as the commonality in the larger coalition: "each of these groups has come up against some form of institutional power such that coalition-building is now a necessity" (1990b, p. 3). Some of these groups work with the institutional church, while others have abandoned the association. Structure, Practices, and membership of each member group varies, depending upon their interests and place on the continuum.

The Women-Church Convergence is the actual working committee of the Women-Church movement. It is composed of elected and self-selected representa-

tives of all the member groups. They meet several times a year for networking and conference planning. There have been three Women-Church Convergences since the first meeting in 1983 in Chicago. Women-Church itself has gotten larger since its inception at the first convergence in 1983. Fifteen hundred people attended the first gathering and twenty-five hundred went to the Albuquerque convergence in 1993. Interviews with participants of Women-Church revealed their overlapping memberships as well as their diverse agendas. These interconnections, as I have come to understand them, form one of Women-Church's greatest strengths for mobilization and growth. However, the diverse goals and agendas of all the groups also adds to the organizational problems of Women-Church. Some difficulties for mobilization also occur as it strives to find an identity as an agent for social change in the church. Yet, all seem to find a home under Women-Church as an umbrella organization that has no formal leadership and that tolerates a wide diversity of religious and spiritual practices. Creating a network of groups and individuals with similar agendas Women-Church enlarges its base of support, and brings in new constituencies such as African American women, Hispanic women and lesbians.

In all areas of church life, in all regions of the United States, and in other countries, women are bypassing and subverting the institutional church. Women-Church participants are creating and participating in their own liturgies (*National Catholic Reporter* 1981, Neu 1981). Women are celebrating the Eucharist, granting absolution to the sick and dying as well as blessing marriages and celebrating covenants for lesbian couples. Church authority is being challenged in the area of dogma as well as liturgy. As part of their feminist ideology, Women-Church members reject hierarchical pronouncements on sexuality and procreative choice (Farrell 1991). Commenting on the institutional church's attempt to control the Cairo conference on population, Frances Kissling, founder of CFFC, noted that the Vatican is a country where there are no families: no women and no children. Episcopal threats of excommunication and church interference in the American political process provide examples of institutional repression, provoking responses that can dramatize and crystallize the feminist critique of institutionalized patriarchy.

All the organizations seem to gain strength from each negative response by the official church to demands by church members for changes in the institution and the teachings of the church. We have only to look at the latest attempts by the pope and the Curia to squash any discussion on ordination or changes in the official line on issues relating to sexuality. The pope issued two recent documents *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) attempting to reinforce the dogmatic nature of church pronouncements and include the question of women's ordination within that framework. An earlier pronouncement issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Faith in 1976 on women's ordination evidently did not close the question.² John Paul states in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that

in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the church's divine constitution itself, in

virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren . . . I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the church's faithful. (1994, quoted from full text printed in the *National Catholic Reporter*, 17 June, p. 7)

These documents not only did not put an end to discussion but in fact increased it. Even Senator Edward Kennedy was solicited for his view of women's ordination (he supports the ordination of women) (Niebuhr 1994). Ruth McDonough Fitzpatrick, former director of WOC, noted that after each letter or pronouncement against women's ordination, their membership increases.

Organizational Problems

However, there are drawbacks to this kind of feminist coalition. It is not yet a perfect feminist organization although that is certainly one of its goals. Inclusivity and diversity, important goals of feminist organizations, also represent the areas of most strain. The evolution of the name "Women-Church" shows evidence of the growing consciousness of the group regarding diversity. Originally called "Woman-Church," many members felt that was too-limiting. There is not one way to be woman, but many ways to be women and Women-Church. This idea mirrors the way in which feminism now speaks of feminisms rather than only one way to be feminist. Both movements strive to be as inclusive and as diverse as possible but strains and conflicts remain.

Individual Women-Church members complain of a bias toward academics when choosing leaders. Some express feelings of inferiority when feminists with academic credentials seem to "take over the steering committee meetings." Participants from the large more bureaucratically organized groups often "took over" the meeting while some asserted their authority through use of professional credentials, such as their positions as theologians or ethicists who held academic positions. This makes it difficult for women from the smaller grassroots groups without academic credentials or professional authority to assert themselves or to be heard on an equal footing. Based on her analysis of organizations striving for feminist goals, Noelle Rodriguez notes that:

inequalities in influence persist because those women who have more seniority, or who are more articulate and dependable, generally carry more weight in the group. Thus, while consensus increases the participation and formal power of individual staff members, it does not eliminate the real differences in informal power among them. (1988, p.222; see also Rothschild-Whitt 1982)

Women of color also feel "forgotten" or silenced during meetings and conferences. At the last Women-Church conference in Albuquerque, the evaluation session at the end became a forum for African American women, Latinas, and American Indian women to express their dissatisfaction with the overall conference format and with their perceived lack of input into the conference organization. I say "perceived" because the conference co-chairs were an African American sister and an Hispanic sociologist. White women who thought the conference was well-representative of racial and ethnic minorities in the church expressed dismay and confusion over the charges raised in the evaluation session.

At Albuquerque, class was an especially difficult issue — both to recognize it as an issue of equal importance with race/ethnicity and to formalize a discussion of classism within the conference. Poverty and economic problems were discussed but the specific issue of class biases, especially on the part of members of Women-Church were not given the same play as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. An extensive interview with a woman who organizes welfare mothers raised an important point regarding full participation. All people who wished to set up a table in the exhibit area were required to pay a fee. Not everyone, however, could afford the fee, especially those below the poverty level. This presented a difficult problem for the welfare mothers' organizer: How could she publicize the plight of welfare mothers when she couldn't afford the cost of a table to distribute her literature. From her perception, the organizers were singularly unsympathetic. She finally secured a table, but she stated that she was subjected to rudeness and verbal abuse from the organizers. She did speak to this problem at the evaluation session. Will this problem be addressed in the next conference? Even more important, can class differences be overcome in the grass-roots organizing? Low income women and men and nonacademics may feel intimidated by the conference-type format and fees. How can these problems be remedied by a group that aspires to encourage a "discipleship of equals" and "making the world a welcoming place" for differences and diversity?

Another question regarding inclusivity is how Women-Church addresses diverse religious practices among its members. Although most members come out of the Roman Catholic tradition, many have incorporated other religious practices into their lives. Roman Catholic feminists are incorporating rituals developed in other religious and spiritual traditions. Feminist Wiccan traditions as well as Native American rituals found a place not only in the exhibit hall but also in the Sunday morning ritual. In fact, Sunday morning was set up so that one could choose from a "plethora of sacred experiences." This included not only Wicca and various Native American rituals but Buddhist, Yoga, Tai Chi, Protestant Christian, Imani Temple Catholic worship (Rev. George Stallings' African American breakaway church), Quaker meeting, and creation (or GAIA) ceremonies as well as a feminist Eucharist. Conference participants were encouraged to attend a ceremony outside their own experience. Most attended the feminist Eucharist. In fact, the Holocaust Remembrance ceremony was canceled due to lack of participants. This raises ques-

tions of latent anti-Semitism or at the very least some insensitivity toward Judaism and Jewish women. How welcome did Jewish women feel in this convergence if there were any? What kind of outreach was done to Jewish women? Questions such as these need to be resolved if Women-Church is serious about inclusion. On the other hand the name Women-Church explicitly reflects a Christian tradition that Jewish women may not be able to come to terms with given the history between Jews and Christians. This history may be too difficult to overcome at this moment in time.

One positive interpretation expressed by some participants is that this plethora of religious rituals may be due to the search on the part of Roman Catholic women for viable alternatives to the present Catholic liturgy, which many experience as oppressive. Women-Church participants with which I've spoken, seem to either see the plurality of liturgical practices as no problem or a positive development. Liturgies created by Diann Neu for WATER appear to be rather generalized and organized around themes or important life cycle events. For example, she has created liturgies for coming out, celebration of menarche and menopause, and seasonal celebrations. These ceremonies use symbols such as water, blood, nature, aging, home, sorrow, and sexuality that exist universally but can be applied and used in personal ways respecting particular meanings in a variety of contexts. These kinds of liturgies may offer the best way to create unity with diversity. Ritual and liturgy reflect solidarity and affirm diversity as well as commitment. However, this "cafeteria-style" presentation of religious beliefs and practices does signify another tension between the Women-Church movement and the institutional church.

The Future

To date, the women in this movement 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. How far can you go without losing Roman Catholic identity? Where is the line or is there one, that when crossed puts you outside the tradition? From the Vatican's perspective, Women-Church may already be over that line. Facing the same conflict as Martin Luther, Women-Church stands at the margins of the institutional church. Will Women-Church remain part of the loyal opposition, challenging from within or will it move to a feminist post-Christian stance a la Mary Daly outside the institutional church? Will this decision be based on a choice made by participants of Women-Church or will it be forced on them by some official church action?

The Pope has already urged U.S. bishops to be vigilante and fight radical fem-

inism and goddess worship among their congregants. To what length will the official church go in its condemnations of what it perceives to be radical feminist practices infiltrating the church? Are there alternatives to the solutions of Martin Luther, Michel Levefre, or George Stallings? How long can the tension between remaining identified with Catholicism and unhappiness with the institution be sustained? However, creating a new social reality (Wallace 1988), re-imagining the church (Chinnici 1992), or re-weaving it (as in the most recent Women-Church Convergence theme) may lead some to find that it is "beyond patching (Schneiders 1991). If the Vatican continues to uphold its present position on women's ordination, ordination of married men, its conservative sexual ethics, and hierarchical organization, will women remain or leave as they perceive that the institution refuses to change? It may take larger numbers of women "defecting in place" (Winter, Lumis, and Stokes 1995) to impact on the church hierarchy or as Ratzinger has often stated, the organizational church would be happier with a mass exodus of troublesome women leaving a meaner, leaner church (Lernoux 1989). Because there is as yet little alternative to Roman Catholic identity and practice that is as satisfying to many of these women, I don't think easy exit of mass numbers will be likely (see Hirschman 1970 for a full discussion of organizational factors that may encourage or discourage exit). Reluctance to give up the more traditional Eucharistic celebration at the last Women-Church convergence and their continued participation in various levels of institutional life are evidence that most women are not yet ready to leave. Can Women-Church become an agent of transformation within the institution? Will it remain a viable feminist social movement and organization if institutional transformation does occur? The future of both church and feminism is at stake.

Update

Women-Church had a strong presence in Beijing at the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women. Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice, was an NGO delegate. Interviewed in various media, she challenged institutional church positions on women's reproductive rights, sexual orientation, family, women's employment, and their objection to the use of the term "gender" since it might endorse homosexuality and transsexuality. Kissling's engagement with Vatican discourse exemplifies the nature of discursive politics and how Women-Church engages it in hope of institutional and social transformation (Conscience 1995, pp. 3-10). The Pope's recent letter to women (1995), illustrates that Women-Church has, at least, provoked the institutional church into a response which is an acknowledgement that the issues are real and need to be addressed. The pope did recognize and apologize for ~~passed~~^{past} suffering although he is not willing to bring women into the ruling hierarchy of the church through ordination. Judging from media responses and responses of some members of Women-Church, the "dialogue" is just beginning.

Notes

1. An expanded form of Schussler Fiorenza's comments on Women-Church can be found in *Women Moving Church*, ed. D. Neu and M. Riley. See also Ruether 1986 for a the "Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities" the subtitle to her book *Women-Church*.
2. See Swidler and Swidler 1977 and Field-Bibb 1991 for extensive discussions on this earlier church document.

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