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Review: 'Women in Catholic Higher Education: Border Work, Living Experiences, and Social Justice'

Carolyn Ridenour

University of Dayton, cridenour1@udayton.edu

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Ridenour, Carolyn, "Review: 'Women in Catholic Higher Education: Border Work, Living Experiences, and Social Justice'" (2004). *Educational Leadership Faculty Publications*. 93.

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BOOK REVIEWS

GERALD CATTARO

Fordham University

WOMEN IN CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: BORDER WORK, LIVING EXPERIENCES, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

SHARLENE NAGY HESSE-BIBER & DENISE LECKENBY, EDS.,
LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2003.

Reviewed by Carolyn S. Ridenour

Twelve courageous writers challenge the structures and priorities of traditional Catholic colleges and universities: contemporary “reality TV” for anyone who values social justice in Catholic education. Throughout the book the writers confront the status quo of Catholic universities, questioning even those who have embraced feminist theology. The editors divided the book into three parts with subheadings that overstate their contents: “Feminist Border Work: Tensions and Contradictions” (3 chapters), “Living Experiences: Identity, Empowerment, and Action” (4 chapters), and “Social Justice: The Ideal, the Reality, and the Quest” (3 chapters). Like bookends, the editors have constructed two additional chapters: one at the beginning to set the stage and one at the end to draw conclusions.

Heavily political in tone, the first section, “Border Work,” discusses several issues of power. Working the “borders,” according to Hesse-Biber and Leckenby, “occurs in the gaps, sometimes forcing a rupture of structural status quo apparatus” (p. 6) precisely because the border is the line, the structure, that limits equitable power and cultural crossover inside Catholic universities. While the editors claim that the second section presents “Living Experiences” of women in Catholic higher education, in truth, all the chapters tell stories of feminists; the authors claim as much when they write, “They are enacting and describing the daily living of feminism within the layers of a patriarchal institution” (p. 7). Indeed, a more appropriate title for the book would have been “Feminists in Catholic Higher Education.” The words “women” and “feminists” are far from synonymous, especially with-

in the context of Catholic higher education. The third section, "Social Justice," is grounded in this as yet unrealized vision of good, justice, and equality in Catholic institutions, a vision blatantly held up by the writers in this section as one we have so far failed to realize.

BORDER WORK

Stories from the margins of Catholic campuses are presented here: personal accounts of an African American woman, a Korean American woman, and a report of a study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual activists. Throughout the section, frameworks of institutional culture and the wider social culture are used as lenses for the authors.

Claiming each of us can be, at once, "witness, victim and perpetrator," Stephanie Mitchem's narrative is a rich tale of one African American woman's experience at a Catholic school. Woven throughout are citations of strong prominent Black feminists that supported her in making meaning of her own experience. In an essay, not a personal memoir, she succeeds in bringing to light the contradictions of Catholic social justice living peaceably alongside racism and sexism.

The sole male author in the book, Patrick Love, effectively employs a cultural framework as he reports on his own research, informed by the voices of over two dozen activists for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. Love suggests, as a result of his findings, that institutional change necessitates not only intimate understanding of the culture but also the need to create a strong counter subculture to foment and sustain the change. The cultural framework links Love's work to the rest of the book; however, this research is not closely aligned to the general thesis of the book.

A Korean American woman, Bonnie Oh, eloquently and frankly addresses cultural dynamics, not primarily from the standpoint of being a woman, but from the double perspective of both insider and outsider. She claims that Catholic institutions, frequently perceived as socially just by those outside are, on closer scrutiny, not so. Oh's essay is a deeply personal account, a memoir, an autoethnography.

LIVING EXPERIENCES

Of the three sections in the book, this reviewer found this section the most valuable. The women authors of these four chapters capture the essence of what it means to work and live at a Catholic college or university. This section includes the sobering stories implied by the book's title.

Caplan and Kuntz, in the lead chapter, capture the theme of the book: "the stories we tell define the terms of our existence" (p. 80). Indirectly, they confront the contemporary pressures for accountability that increasingly

dominate all institutions of higher education. Correctly assuming that consistency between mission and program guides accountability, they describe the tension between the faith-based obligations of a Catholic educational institution and the brute fact that, in their experiences, no administrator has ever questioned a course syllabus or instructional strategy. Their story of establishing a gender studies program and subsequently teaching its courses would be invaluable to those at other institutions contemplating such change. Voices of students enrich their narrative. Unfortunately for the reader, this chapter is filled with errors – obvious typographical and grammatical mistakes. Oddly, evidence of poor editing occurred very frequently in this chapter and sporadically in other chapters.

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, one of the two editors of the volume, writes the following chapter, one of the two best chapters in the book; the other is by Patricia McGuire. Hesse-Biber asks the crucial question faced by leaders of Women's Studies programs in Catholic institutions that struggle in a time of heightened enrollment competition: How do feminists deal with the frustration and/or anger of students' family members who perceive feminism as the antithesis of Biblical teaching on the role of women? Furthermore, the question is posed to the institution as well: "How far can I communicate the range of opinion (including feminist values concerning women's roles) without alienating the very institution which is supportive of the women's studies program?" (p. 93). While she does not resolve these tensions, Hesse-Biber artfully poses the dilemma for the readers. It is clear that she strongly respects the faith tradition. She accepts the tension, the conflict, and the necessarily "perilous" position of women's studies in a Catholic milieu. Negotiation, she claims, will be everlasting. She mixes stories of institutional change with her own deep personal and revealing perceptions, rendering this chapter a valuable window into a woman's life from a variety of perspectives. Importantly, she expresses a fear: "One fear I have is that the outcome of negotiating will mean "adding and stirring" women's concerns into the university setting, so we have a little bit about women, a little about race, and a little bit about class issues, while the institutional core remains unchallenged and unchanged" (p. 96).

Margaret D. Stetz tells the story of the successful women's studies program at Georgetown, carrying forward the theme in the prior chapter by Hesse-Biber. She situates women's studies at Catholic institutions as fraught with personal, theological, political, and social tensions that secular institutions do not face. Negotiating faith-based differences in beliefs about sexuality, contraception, and reproductive rights at Catholic institutions should not be seen as huge burdens, but rather these differences might be a strength – a structure for deep and meaningful dialogue and personal growth among students and faculty.

The highlight of the book was the chapter by Patricia A. McGuire, a reprint of a speech she gave in 1994: a rousing, exciting, bold, unambiguous, and aggressive call to risk the threat of the lions who would destroy us, including,

ignorance, hatred, despair, contempt for human life, contempt for God, sheer evil devouring millions of helpless lambs each day, wasted little lives trapped in their crushing jaws of poverty, racism, sexism, tyranny, crime, violence, greed – the endless list of human horrors. (p. 110)

in order that women in Catholic higher education be victors not victims. Grounded in great women of the past, McGuire sets forth both vision and mission for women leaders of the future, a bold yet pragmatic agenda that calls for what she terms “prudent recklessness,” a willingness to go to the margins, to the edge of possibility.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Joan A. Range tells both a personal and a scholarly story in the first chapter in this section. While employing the “imposter phenomenon” as a springboard to her thesis, she then quickly abandons it as she poses important questions about feminist theology. She discusses both the struggle and the opportunities for feminists to become indigenous to the culture of theology. Range connects contemporary feminism to the legacy of theologians who have come before her and then takes it beyond the present to a promising future.

Stephanie Bressler tells a powerful story of personal identity and experience in political and social change from the perspective of a non-Christian feminist at a Catholic university. Achieving coherence among the various strands of her life – her personal commitment to work for social justice, her calling to work publicly for social change, and her commitment to the traditions of her Catholic university – led to transformation and unpredictable shifts in her life. She questioned herself:

I also worried that in my struggle to promote this convergence [fitting my social justice concerns to Catholic social teachings] I might be perceived by those I work with on migrant labor issues outside of the academy as somehow capable of delivering Catholic institutional support for their cause. I also considered whether I had begun to use my social justice work to bolster my own professional interests by exploiting *Ex Corde* to make my work more valued at a Catholic college. And, in doing so, was I also bending to and, as a result, perpetuating hierarchies of authority and control that forced me to make choices among issues of importance to me? (p. 141)

Her story ends in surprising ways.

Barbara E. Wall faces the future, an apt ending voice to this section. She constructs what lies ahead for Catholic universities on many levels. The historical tradition of Catholic social thought eloquently frames her perspective.

SUMMARY

This is a good book, some of it – downright bold. Readers will be challenged, provoked even, into thinking more deeply about issues. This reviewer loaned the book to others, highlighting one section or another. Hesse-Biber captures its value: “You cannot create new paradigms unless there is some shared meaning. To dialogue means: to confront our assumptions; to suspend judgment; to accept and embrace differences; to listen as a means towards building a new paradigm” (p. 98).

Carolyn S. Ridenour is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Dayton.

CATHOLIC FROM THE INSIDE OUT

THE CORE GROUP, GARDEN & WALL PUBLISHERS, 2003.

Reviewed by Gareth D. Zehrbach

Catholic From the Inside Out (The Core Group, 2003) provides the reader with a unique perspective on educational reform. This book, written by a small group of educational practitioners rather than researchers, recounts the findings from a 2-year self study by an elementary Catholic school as it attempted to implement school-wide reforms. Besides the occasional infusion of Catholic jargon, the book is a straightforward read as its vocabulary and format are none too complex. The simplicity of the book, however, should not lead one to believe that its content does not offer valuable insights into educational reform. On the contrary, *Catholic From the Inside Out* gives witness to the powerful force that organizational culture can have on the performance of an organization.