

# Coisas do Gênero

REVISTA DE ESTUDOS FEMINISTAS EM TEOLOGIA E RELIGIÃO



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## Catholic Women's Power in Changing Times

O poder das mulheres católicas em tempos de mudança

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**Resumo:** Mudanças políticas significativas estão ocorrendo no Brasil, Estados Unidos e muitos outros países. Da mesma forma, mudanças eclesiais estão ocorrendo na Igreja Católica Romana durante o pontificado de Francis. Este artigo explora algumas das dinâmicas que incluem cargos maiores para as mulheres e as reações que acompanha essas mudanças. Um dos resultados é o que a autora chama de “Catolicismo Cósmico”, uma maneira de descrever uma ampliação e aproximação religiosa cada vez mais inclusiva, que pode ser conducente à justiça e socialmente útil.

**Palavras-chave:** Catolicismo. Catolicismo cósmico. Feminismo. Ministério. Pessoas sem religião. Papa Francisco. Poder.

**Abstract:** Significant political changes are taking place in Brazil, the United States, and many other countries. Likewise, ecclesial changes are taking place in the Roman Catholic Church during the pontificate of Francis. This paper explores some of the dynamics that include larger roles for women and backlash that accompanies such changes. One result is what the author calls “Cosmic Catholicism,” a way to describe a broadening and increasingly inclusive religious approach that can be conducive of justice and socially useful.

**Keywords:** Catholic. Cosmic Catholicism. Feminist. Ministry, “Nones”. Pope Francis. Power.

### Introduction

Both Brazil and the United States are experiencing political upheaval rarely seen in either country. Whether the impeachment discussions against President Dilma Rousseff or the steamroller of presidential candidate Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton and others in his way, change is normative. How does this relate to the experiences of progressive Catholic women during the pontificate of Francis?

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Catholic women are the canaries in the coalmine when it comes to the Roman Catholic Church. We are living in a liminal time when change is coming more quickly and profoundly than most people realize. I explore this situation in three parts, (1) beginning with a look at the current context, (2) then making a case for the importance of the change, and (3) concluding with a way to describe who Catholics are becoming, namely, Cosmic Catholics. My perspective is grounded in the U.S. reality, but I sense it has some echo in other contexts as well.

Pope Francis got it right when he said, “We are not living an era of change but a change of era.” (Nov. 9, 2016). That statement, buried by most of the press but caught by some eagle eyes, sums up aptly the situation of the Catholic community. I was born and raised Catholic. I have worked for decades as a feminist theologian and activist to transform the institutional Church from a hierarchical, or what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has named a kyriarchal structure (that is, one made up of interlocking forms of oppression, prominently racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism among others) to an egalitarian community or what she has called a “discipleship of equals.”<sup>1</sup>

The Discipleship of Equals includes the women-church movement of feminist base communities; the ordination movement that has several organizational expressions; movements for reproductive justice, queer rights, married priests, full communion of all who divorce, among other movements. I daresay it is changing the face of Catholicism.

What Pope Francis got wrong was his continued inability or unwillingness to deal with the fact that a major component of this new era is the full and equal participation, especially in leadership and decision-making, of women around the world in matters of church and society. Ironically, such changes are taking place just about everywhere but the Roman Catholic Church.

Think of women’s leadership in Canada, for example. While the number of Members of Parliament is still below what the UN calls for in nearly every government, Prime Minister Trudeau’s cabinet is gender equal. Consider the business world. Air India celebrated International Women’s Day in 2016 by having an all-women crew fly its longest flight from New Delhi to San Francisco. We are far from equality, especially for poor women with dependent children, migrant/refugee women, and others. But the stunning recalcitrance of the Roman Catholic Church on matters related to women—which is every matter -- makes the Pope’s statement about living a change of era either mysterious or disingenuous or both.

Likewise, when well-intentioned people praise this pope as such an improvement over earlier ones it simply reflects low expectations for popes. Such laudatory statements are true only if there is a huge parenthesis in which we fit all Catholic women, so we can say the Pope is great for half of the church. For instance, theologian Leonardo Boff praises Francis as practically the

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<sup>1</sup> FIORENZA, Elisabeth Schüssler, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001, p. 134.

reincarnation of Jesus, citing the Pope's tepid tiptoeing about maybe using birth control in the face of the Zika virus as evidence of change.<sup>2</sup> I repeat, the bar is so low. Such praise from Boff and others, without explicit rejoinders about Francis' positions on women and LGBTIQ people, is deeply insulting to Catholic women and queers who apparently do not count for much in a world envisioned by Boff. If a common sense notion like birth control in the face of a disease that harms children is considered Jesus-like, the bar is lower than I thought. What does it take to open the conversation?

## I. Current Context

Let me explore the new Catholic reality, this change of era.

### a. Diversity of things Catholic

The word "Catholic" now defines a multitude of ways of being religious. When James Joyce wrote "Here Comes Everybody" in his attempt in *Finnegans Wake* to describe Catholicism, I doubt he had some of us in mind.<sup>3</sup> But one thing we can say about 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholicism is that it is far more diverse than ever in church history.

The growth of Catholicism in Africa and Asia in the last two decades is the real Catholic news story. It is amazing that African bishops went from being colonized subjects in Rome to thought leaders for the whole church. Regardless of what I think of some of their thoughts at the 2015 Synod on the Family—some of them were remarkably conservative—their voices are welcome in a democratic church.

Globalization has a lot to do with the changes. But so, too, does the dramatic uptick in communication that allows us in the North and West, for example, to learn from and about our colleagues in other parts of the world, especially those in places that have been marginalized and peripheral to church power dynamics. I do not mean to suggest that we are a just or equal church when it comes to sharing resources or taking various experiences as normative. Indeed we are far from that. But I think it is hard to dispute the impact of people from around the globe on things Catholic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That, by my lights, is a good thing even, I repeat, when I do not fully agree with the views articulated.

For example, Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea warned the synod that the modern family faced "two unexpected threats, almost like two apocalyptic beasts, located on opposite poles: on the one hand, the idolatry of Western freedom; on the other, Islamic fundamentalism." "What Nazi-fascism and communism were in the 20th century, Western homosexual and abortion ideologies and

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<sup>2</sup> BOFF, Leonardo, "Pope Francis restores the good sense of Jesus". Retrieved from: <<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/pope-francis-restores-the-good-sense-of-jesus-by-leonardo-boff>>. Accessed on: March 13, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> JOYCE, James, *Finnegans Wake*, NY: Faber and Faber, 1939.

Islamic fanaticism are today.”<sup>4</sup> I could not disagree with him more, but I am delighted that his voice is in the conversation, just as one day I hope he will delight in hearing mine.

At the Women’s Ordination Conference/Women’s Ordination Worldwide gathering in Philadelphia in September 2015, women from India talked of working with their bishops. How long that will last remains to be seen. They run programs that give the larger church a sense of women’s experiences. Few women in the West have ever found a way to do that without being totally coopted by the men or having to quit because the power dynamics were so egregiously unbalanced.

The women of Mexico who participated in WOC/WOW described their efforts to engage in ministry and the shaping of their communities. The Australians at that same meeting were an impressive lot, not likely to take a backseat to anyone in their church. Of course many of these women, like many of us in the U.S., are well educated, wealthy, privileged women which means very little has changed. Still as diverse cultural influences shape new realities the 21<sup>st</sup> century Roman Catholic Church is not immune.

An International Women’s Day event at the Vatican, Voices of Faith, was a good example of the mixed blessings that can emerge. The gathering was sponsored by a group of women from some of the wealthiest Catholic donor families, several with their own foundations that support the institutional church. These women have been meeting with high-ranking church officials in Rome, many of them family friends, for years.

This was their third public event held at the Vatican on International Women’s Day. Morning presentations on traditional works of charity, including rescuing child brides, support for migrant women, help for women with babies, etc. gave way to an afternoon panel on women’s leadership in the church chaired by a Jesuit, an odd choice on the one day of the year when women’s voices are invited. Speakers carefully avoided the hot-button issues, including birth control, abortion, women’s ordination, and LGBTIQ concerns rendering the whole exercise, in my view, far less fruitful than it might have been.

I sensed the ease with which wealthy women embraced charity, eager and willing to help those less fortunate, was matched only by their fear and reluctance to call for justice for women within church structures. Still, the fact that such discussions are taking place worldwide, especially in the Vatican however belatedly, is, in my view, a baby step in the right direction, an indication of change. But it can be dicey if this kind of conversation passes for the real thing—an honest and robust airing of the egregious theological, structural, and practical disregard for women that is normative in the Catholic institution. Moreover, for such work to go on apart from movements for

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<sup>4</sup> The Wall Street Journal. “Africans Defend Conservative Line on Gays, Divorce at Catholic Bishops’ Synod”. Retrieved from: <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/africans-defend-conservative-line-on-gays-divorce-at-catholic-bishops-synod-1444901457>>. Accessed on: March 27, 2016.

reproductive justice, queer rights, etc. is highly problematic. Women qua women are not the solution; feminists qua feminists are.

*b. Rise of the nones*

Another factor that is playing a key role in the change of era is the rise of the nones, the people who check ‘none of the above’ when it comes to religious affiliation. A recent Pew Research Center study indicates that 23% of U.S. adults identify in this category, and they are becoming more and more secular, that is, less and less religious over time.<sup>5</sup> Contrast this with the Catholics who appear to be “declining both as a percentage of the population and in absolute numbers. The new survey indicates there are about 51 million Catholic adults in the U.S. today, roughly 3 million fewer than in 2007.”<sup>6</sup> We can conclude that fewer people find religion useful, a phenomenon that has swept Europe in recent decades. The growing number of “former Catholics” is said to be the second largest denominations in the United States.

Canadian numbers are from 2013 as opposed to 2015 for the US numbers, but they are quite similar: “Two-thirds of Canadians (including adults and children) identify either as Catholic or as Protestant, but both Christian groups have seen substantial erosion in their shares of the Canadian public, according to the analysis by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life. The percentage of Canadians who identify as Catholic has dropped from 47% to 39% over the last four decades, while the share that identifies as Protestant has fallen even more steeply, from 41% to 27%.”<sup>7</sup> I suspect these trends will repeat in Latin America. If I were in leadership of any of these groups I would be worried about market share.

These numbers have concrete meaning. Most U.S. Catholic families find that a fair number of their members are no longer practicing Catholics with younger people less likely than their elders to be engaged in organized religion, suggesting a trend for the future. Still, more families experience a change in their WAY of being Catholic. They are thinking for themselves, using birth control, and having abortions at the same rate as non-religiously affiliated women, and so forth. Among young women, a higher percentage than among their male counterparts are no longer involved in a church for reasons I do not think are coincidental. Spirituality as a human right is now being violated on

<sup>5</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER. “Religious ‘nones’ are not only growing, they’re becoming more secular”. Pew Research Center (2015). Retrieved from: <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>>. Accessed on: July 28, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”. Pew Research Center (2015). Retrieved from: <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>>. July 28, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2013). “Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape”. Retrieved from: <<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/>>. Accessed on: July 25, 2016.



many levels by the institutional Roman Catholic Church. It is no wonder people are voting with their feet.

*c. Pope Francis as a force of history*

What does Pope Francis have to do with any of this? This is the 4<sup>th</sup> year of his papacy. The introductory period, also known as the honeymoon, is over and the shape of his pontificate is clear. Conservative Catholics are sure the end time is near, blaming him for upsetting their applecart that Popes John Paul II and Benedict kept filled to the brim from 1978- 2013, thirty-five years. While admittedly progressives are encouraged by Francis, there is very little concrete change to which we can point.

The Pope's visit to the U.S., even by my critical lights, was an overwhelming success. We simply have not seen the like of him before with his reach into the political sphere as well as his deft pastoral touch. The man is obviously gifted in multiple ways, helped along by conservative media worker Greg Burke, the former Fox News Opus Dei associate who has an increasingly strong hand in Vatican public relations.

During his U.S. visit, it was hard to separate the joyous receptions, the sweet pastoral moments, especially with children and those who are ill, from the all-male, mostly-clerical backdrops. It was impossible to view the masses and prayer services without noting the complete absence of women in any meaningful liturgical leadership roles.

It was stunning to think that the same crowds that cheered his helpful words about economic justice and the role of the U.S. in the world—the country of Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton as he put it—were completely silent in the face of his all-male contingent of aides, his meals with men while women served the table, and the myriad male assemblies of bishops, seminarians, priests, from which women were systematically excluded.

It was equally hard to miss the homosocial context in which the pope lives. With some gaydar operating, one could imagine the probability of homosexual dynamics at work too. I would be the last to oppose same-sex love, but I am the first to call out duplicity and there is a great deal of it in official Catholic settings. I find it hard to watch whether it is seminarians or cardinals who live as they wish and get paid to uphold publicly teachings and practices that oppress.

History will record that he tried mightily against enormous odds to reform the financial structures of the Vatican, to replace some of the most egregious offenders in high Vatican offices, and to inspire the Catholic community to simple living, sharing of resources, and merciful ways. Ironically, the very cardinal he chose to put the financial house in order, Australian George Pell, has been at the center of that country's sexual abuse cases. Mr. Pell was pressured into testifying long

distance for the Australian government's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Pell's anti-queer statements speak for themselves.

Lamentably, history will also record that few if any structural changes took place, at least in these early years of Francis' pontificate. No changes accrued for women save several very safe appointments of women to a few Vatican offices. But no women have been ordained or named as cardinals (who do not necessarily have to be ordained). Other than Mother Theresa's impending sainthood, for better or for worse, nothing but the same old rhetoric about women's special role has been uttered. Francis has referred to women theologians as "the strawberries on the cake." His decision to allow women to have their feet washed in the Holy Thursday service was seen as progress. But once again his cheerleaders miss the real issue, namely, that women still cannot participate as feet washers on a day when the Catholic Church celebrates the male priesthood.

So the Francis factor, in my view, is a mixed bag at best, and a complicating one at worst. After all, it is hard to call for structural changes in the papacy when the pope is very popular especially among would-be progressive people. It was an easier sell in the Ratzinger years, when the pope himself, Benedict XVI, was a largely unsympathetic figure. Then it was clear that only real structural change, not simply cosmetic change is necessary. Alas, in the Francis years there are hints and glimpses of what might be possible—for example, Francis famous response with regard to gay Catholic priests, "Who am I to judge?" One would think that as a Christian Francis would want to judge, and judge favorably, relationships of love. For Francis to still have a question in his mind, and for people to grab onto such words as if they were full-throated endorsements of love is morally embarrassing in my view.

*d. The fallout from clergy sex abuse and episcopal cover-up, aggression toward nuns, rejection of women/LGBTIQ people as full members of the church*

Another element of the current Catholic context is the rampaging elephant in the Catholic living room, namely, the priest pedophilia cases and episcopal cover-ups so well documented in the case of the U.S. Archdiocese of Boston in the Oscar-winning film "Spotlight." That is the story of the *Boston Globe* investigative team looking into cases of priests who sexually abused children. One of the most powerful parts of the movie is at the end when there is a list of other places that experienced similar problems. Audiences have gasped at the length of the list, filling two screens eventually, of the names of cities all over the U.S. where priests have been credibly accused and cases adjudicated. I admit it is shocking but I suspect it is the same around the world.

According to the National Catholic Reporter, “The U.S. Catholic church has incurred nearly \$4 billion in costs related to the priest sex abuse crisis during the past 65 years...”<sup>8</sup> I believe we have only seen the tip of this iceberg. In the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a Grand Jury report stated that “Hundreds of children were molested, raped and destined to lasting psychological trauma by clerics whose abuses were covered up by their bishops, other superiors and even compliant law-enforcement officials in Blair and Cambria counties [...] The conspiracy amounted to ‘soul murder,’ the report said, with abuse happening everywhere from camps and homes to the historic cathedral itself. That description echoes that of similar grand jury probes into the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in 2005 and 2011 that found cardinals and other clerics shifted numerous known abusers from one unsuspecting parish to another.”<sup>9</sup>

Many cases of clergy sexual abuse of adult women have yet to see the light of day. More than virtually any of the other factors that shape this change of era, these cases, each one a tragedy on its own terms, have eroded confidence in the Roman Catholic Church, caused untold amounts of shame and guilt not just in victim/survivors but in others as well, and annulled any moral authority the institutional church might want to claim.

Vatican aggression toward nuns, the non-ordination of women, reproductive injustice, and the egregious mistreatment of LGBTIQ Catholics are part of this context. I lump them together with the abuse problems because they are all part of the same effort to distract attention from heinous crimes, a desperate attempt to maintain the status quo so as to hide criminal behavior. I am not sure I even understand yet all that is involved, but I have no other explanation for the institution’s actions given that our cultures have become more and more open to difference and diversity. In an effort to distract from clergy sexual abuse and episcopal cover-ups of criminal activity, hierarchical church officials engaged in disciplining women’s religious orders, opposition to women in ordained ministry with jurisdiction, campaigns against birth control and abortion, heavy spending to push back against marriage equality, and firing queer people from Catholic institutions.

The exaggerated role these matters have had in church life attests to the fact that something deeper is going on. For example, nuns are hardly the enemy; gay priests/bishops protest too much over same-sex marriage; and abortion is no more problematic than the death penalty except that women’s bodies are involved. Put simply, I think the virulent opposition to women and to open, affirming, self-actualized LGBTIQ people is rooted in a fear that we will see what goes on and hold

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<sup>8</sup> RUHL, Jack; RUHL, Diane. National Catholic Reporter (2015). “NCR research: Costs of sex abuse crisis to US church underestimated”. Retrieved from: <<http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/ncr-research-costs-sex-abuse-crisis-us-church-underestimated>>. Accessed on: July 20, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> SMITH, Peter. Pittsburgh Post Gazette (2016). “Grand jury: Altoona diocese concealed sex abuse of hundreds of children by priests”. Retrieved from: <<http://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2016/03/01/Staggering-abuse-cover-up-in-Altoona-Johnstown-diocese-grand-jury-says/stories/201603010091>>. Accessed on: July 20, 2016.



clergymen, many of them closeted gay men, accountable. Keeping women and queer people out of power is stonewalling long after any reasonable arguments against our full participation have been put to rest.

The Apostolic Visitation of women's religious communities and the Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious were high profile, high dollar efforts to discredit the very women who have been arguably the most faithful exponents of the very values that Pope Francis is now touting. The nuns run schools and hospitals, work in soup kitchens and prison ministries, pastor parishes and make peace. Green Nuns made environmental work their signature long before it was trendy. Though both scapegoating campaigns were eventually settled, seemingly in the nuns' favor, no power dynamics changed. The same riding roughshod over women's lives could be repeated in the future. While the impact on women religious was positive in terms of women's bonding with one another over against an oppressor, it was negative in that some women colluded against others. Furthermore, the resulting publicity distracted from the criminal acts of some men of the church.

The non-ordination of women is another case of the institutional church missing the boat. While decades ago one could be forgiven for conflating gender with competence, fitness, and suitability for a task, those days are long over. Witness the U.S. Army Ranger program with its successful women graduates. This is not some simplistic gender essentialism that renders women less than men. In this era of change with the advent of transgender people, we do not know what a man is or what a woman is, so such categories serve little purpose. Rather, I believe it is rooted in the unwillingness to share jurisdiction, that is, decision-making, with women and others who are systematically excluded. This, far more than the rejection of women's sacramental and pastoral ministerial talent/training is an effort to avoid having "outsiders" see the way things really work in many dioceses.

Failed efforts to stop marriage equality, even after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2015 making it legal, represents a major expenditure of church money for which no lay persons and no women priests/bishops have voice or vote in deciding. Instead, San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone and colleagues keep pressing against settled law. While no one is forcing the Roman Catholic Church to host same-sex weddings, neither do church officials have a right to expend millions of dollars intended to care for those made poor and to eradicate poverty on lawsuits and referenda campaigns to turn back an idea whose time has come and which many countries throughout the world have settled.

The anti-abortion campaign is another such example of clerical leadership run amok. From the annual march in Washington to the tombstones and crosses commemorating fetuses so blatantly displayed in front of some churches, the drumbeat goes on. The mistaken claim of religious liberty



as a screen for exempting some Catholic and other institutions from providing full reproductive health care to employees leaves no doubt about an institutional church out of touch with its members.<sup>10</sup> Such a sensible accommodation in a democracy is simply more than some Catholic groups can tolerate. We will see what the Court has to say, but my own view is that this is religion run amok in a religiously pluralistic country.

Sadly, leaders of these efforts seem not to have gotten Pope Francis' message to move on from what theologian Daniel C. Maguire aptly named "pelvic zone" issues and focus instead on war, the economy, and the environment. Catholic social teachings against war in favor of economic justice and recently, with the publication of Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* on ecological justice, are major contributions to the global conversation. But it is hard to recommend such documents when their underlying premises about women are so dubious.

Given these contextual factors, it is not hard to make the case for change in this new era.

## II. The Case for Change

It is morally embarrassing to be part of an organization that discriminates. Even Cardinal Pell in his testimony to the Australian Royal Commission admitted that he could not defend the indefensible. But the indefensible is not limited to sexual abuse; it includes denial of women's moral agency, queer people's human rights, and so forth. Since being religious is a voluntary activity, many are now what those who study religious trends call not simply 'nones' but 'dones' that is, those who say they are finished with religion, period.

Some people want to harken back to Vatican II, but it is long in the rearview mirror. As much change as it ushered in, conservative forces in the institutional church have ushered out. Many young and not so young adults now making decisions about their religious lives had no experience whatsoever of the life before Vatican II, the excitement the Council generated in baby boomer Catholics and their parents, and how profoundly disappointing the last thirty-five years have been. For them, Vatican II is the functional equivalent to the Councils of Trent and Chalcedon. The post-Vatican II era is over both in real terms and in usefulness as a metaphor. Likewise, we have all seen the impact of conservative Catholics on the whole church as it has shaped their default experience.

Moreover, the U.S. religious marketplace is crowded with options—contemplative practice such as Buddhist meditation is popular; yoga is big; 12 step programs meet many people's spiritual needs; Protestant churches, especially the Episcopal and Lutheran sacramental traditions, appeal to many Catholics; the Unitarians and the United Church of Christ appeal in their liberalism, to name

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<sup>10</sup> DEBATE CLUB. U.S. News (2014). "Do the Little Sisters of the Poor Have a Case Against Obamacare?". Retrieved from: <<http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/do-the-little-sisters-of-the-poor-have-a-case-against-obamacare>>. Accessed on: July 28, 2016.



just a few of the options Catholics are taking when they tire of the Roman Church. There is a noticeable increase in religious offerings online and on the telephone. Obviously, the hunger and thirst for community have not abated just because an institutional church is so corrupt or other offerings do not appeal. Nor has our desire to engage in social justice work taken a back seat just because the usual organizational forms are so fragile. Rather, as we say in the women-church movement, we let the needs of the world not the failings of the church set our agenda.

Many people have relied on their religious faith to help ground, orient, and animate responses to structural injustice. Now, with the institutional Roman Catholic Church in sorry shape, I worry that many people are without an important resource to motivate, nurture, and support their efforts. Rather than abandon a rich tradition, not to mention its resources, or leave it in the hands of naïve people, I propose to embrace what I call “Cosmic Catholicism” as a reasonable and exciting alternative. After all, our frame now is cosmic with concern for Earth and beyond a real part of contemporary consciousness.

### III. Cosmic Catholicism

“Cosmic Catholicism” is one way of naming where many Catholics find themselves. I think of the Catholic community as a picture that began rather small and has grown and grown and grown both in numbers and, more importantly, in a variety of expression. But the picture frame in which this picture hangs has not grown at all. In essence, the picture has outgrown its frame. I think of the Roman Catholic Church as the frame and the Catholic community as the picture. We range widely from Opus Dei to Catholics for Choice, from Rome to Berkeley, from contemplative nuns to exuberant teens, but all claim to fit into a growing canvas of believers. This does not even begin to address the complexity of orthodox Catholics. Rather, it underscores the point that Roman Catholicism is but one of many options. Cosmic Catholic is another.

Several people have used the phrase “cosmic Catholic” offhandedly. But I want to claim it intentionally and ground it in a concrete understanding of what can seem quite diffuse and amorphous at first glance. By “Cosmic Catholicism” (I am still debating on capital c’s or small c’s for both) **I mean a spiritual and religious embrace of all that is (‘catholic’), of the ongoing divine creation of human, animal, and plant life that we can see, and so much that we cannot see.** In partnership with science, our embrace just keeps getting bigger and our responsibilities more intense to safeguard the goodness of Earth and what lies beyond in the cosmos. In terms of theology and the world’s many religions, there is a growing variety of ways of expressing what is most meaningful and valuable. In terms of action, there are infinitely more and more people with whom to collaborate for justice. This is the stuff of 21<sup>st</sup> century faith that shapes communities and serves as a springboard for interplanetary life.

Today's children are maturing in a context in which many faith perspectives are respected and honored. Catholicism is no longer better than, or even first among equals, but equal among equals. No one religion has the final, correct-for-all-time answer. This will take some getting used to for many Catholics who were educated otherwise, and especially for Roman authorities who repeat relentlessly that Roman Catholicism is the only true Church of Christ.

This new reality requires a different kind of faith than the certainty that characterized an earlier Catholic worldview. It invites a variety of perspectives, a range of practices, and respect for diversity both among religions, and perhaps even more so *within* traditions. Being religious this way takes practice. That is why we are called practicing Catholics!

Generally speaking, religion takes place in the public arena whereas spirituality is a largely internal matter. So institutional forms of religion matter a lot. If an institution, like the Vatican, is incapable of carrying the freight of the Gospel, then it can and must change. This is why women's religious communities, for example, have changed so dramatically. They are not responding to fads and trends, but to the needs of the world and the capacity of their members to meet those needs. Anything less is wasteful.

A glimpse of some aspects of Cosmic Catholicism invites more development but gives some sense of how this might work in the changing power dynamics of contemporary life. For example, **ministry is the exercise of creativity in response to need.** This intentionally broad understanding makes ministry a common activity in cosmic Catholicism, priesthood is not central, but ministry is. For those who make it their life's work, or some part of it, there are myriad options and yet to be crafted models. Catholic women, generally unwelcome in seminaries, forced to pay for their own education, and lacking any job security when they finish, have led the way on this.

There are some emerging training programs that reflect the new needs of a religiously diverse world. There are programs of study where Catholic students, Presbyterian students, Jewish students for the rabbinate, and Muslim students becoming imams all take classes together. Schools like Hartford Seminary in Connecticut and Chicago Theological Seminary are preparing students for ministry together the way law and medical students train in the early years of the degree programs. They all take the same classes; they specialize later on. So there are Muslims studying with Catholics, Jews learning with Methodists in classrooms of future ministers. This means preparing people to minister in a religiously pluralistic world and one in which many people are not religious at all but still have human needs for accompaniment, companionship, education and the like.

Theology in cosmic Catholicism requires equally diverse and creative input. **Theology is a team sport, a collective enterprise that takes place in communities whose members ask and answer questions of ultimate meaning and value.** The academic input, especially history, theory and scripture studies, collides with *lo cotidiano* as *mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz named

the daily experiences of people. Just as in particle physics where accelerators speed up the particles so that in colliding they may take on new forms, so, too, in theology do we bring together the rich resources of many religions, the physical and social sciences, the arts, and above all, common human experiences, to imagine new answers to new questions by new questioners.

This complex and inclusive process is simply too important to be left in the hands of a few. Theology is the power to name and articulate what is and what should be, our best guesses and reasonable hopes about divine and human interaction. It is power that must be shared to realize its potential. That power sharing is at the heart of our new era and it is not done easily.

The containers of that power are the structures of an organization. That is why institutional church change is an important part of the new era. **The container called Roman Catholicism is not big enough for the reality called Cosmic Catholicism.** Nor are the hierarchical, better, kyriarchal structures adequate for the power sharing required in this new era. It is simply impossible in an age of instant communication and information sharing to have top-down ways of doing things in anything but a dictatorship. In democratic organizations, there are plenty of ways to socialize data and share decision-making. These insights undergird many Catholic women's efforts to create new forms of church both because of our exclusion from the kyriarchal church and because it makes better sense than trying to tinker with a broken model.

The Roman-centrism has long outlived its usefulness. In cosmic Catholicism, decentralized, horizontally integrated, indigenous-led groups can and do function much better. Of course, there is much to overhaul, much to imagine if we are to create useful structures that facilitate sharing, communication, and decision-making. While we do the deconstructive work in Rome and in local chanceries that will need to be repurposed, we need to do the rebuilding work at the local level. It will be difficult at best, but I am convinced that even in our worst moments the simple effort to listen and include many voices will be a considerable improvement over the current exclusionary model. If we cannot hear our African sisters and brothers, what can the Catholic Martians expect?!

At the heart of religion is not institutions but spirituality. **The Catholic spiritual heritage, rich beyond imagining, is a combination of sacrament and solidarity based on values and practices articulated in the Gospels.** It seems pointless to jettison rather than incorporate these useful dimensions into cosmic Catholicism, so I recommend weaving them in among the new offerings.

Not surprisingly but rather ironically, liturgy and ritual become the ground zero of religious change. Seemingly benign practices can generate the most friction, the deepest misunderstanding, and the hardest feelings. In Catholic circles, some of the most vigorous battles are over liturgical language as if the words themselves were more important than the spirit behind uttering them. The



matter of women priests is officially banned from discussion because it is so unthinkable to some with narrow views who claim to know what the Divine intends.

I think these power struggles arise because our deepest intuition is that we want to be one—one with the divine, one with each another, one with the cosmos—and yet our individuality begs expression too. It is almost inevitable then that we will clash and that it will be painful as more and more people become protagonists of our own religious life.

Religion is a dynamic experience, one that shifts with the generations. Thus, at a time when political upheaval is the new normal, it is useful to look at religions, in this case Catholicism, to understand how foundational the changes are. Just as Catholicism will look different in the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century, so, too, the contemporary political landscape and its power dynamics will result in new, not always welcome, changes. If there is more inclusion, variety and commitment to justice, there is reason to be optimistic, even hopeful. If there is contraction, homogeneity and oppression, there is reason to be pessimistic, even fearful. The answer is not yet clear but Catholic women are important protagonists in the struggle.

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