

Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought

Volume 6

Issue 1 *Women, Social Policy, and the Law*

Article 5

10-5-2012

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Recommended Citation

Cowdin, Daniel (2012) "Elizabeth M. Bucar: Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol6/iss1/5>

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Elizabeth M. Bucar: *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women*

Washington, D.C. : Georgetown University Press, 2011. 201 pp. ISBN 9781589017399 (pbk. : alk. paper)

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Although not competent to comment on this book from the perspective of feminist scholarship or women's studies, I can comment as a religion/theology teacher at the college level, a moderately liberal Catholic, and a scholar of Christian ethics.

As a teacher of religion and theology in the undergraduate college classroom, I could not be more appreciative of Elizabeth Bucar's excellent study of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i women, not because it is appropriate as an undergraduate text (it is not), but because it opens a window onto the genuinely meaningful pluralism, and hence living dimensions, within these religious traditions. Liberal secular culture, both at the intellectual and popular levels, tends to write off Roman Catholicism and Iranian Shi'i Islam as monolithically static and oppressive. Some feminist perspectives are no exception to this tendency, and at times lead the way. Bucar self-reflectively articulates "the central question of this book: How can a scholar understand religious women's political arguments without her own feminist commitments interfering?" (xiii). Clearly, static and oppressive dimensions exist within both traditions. Even so, an examination of actual lives lived in and through these religions reveals a more complex picture. Bucar succeeds at her task, exploring in rich and complex detail the internal diversity, meaningful individual choices, and ongoing conversations within these traditions. In the process, she challenges liberal, secular, and feminist readers to be "open to learn from women within settings different from our own."(xvii). Bucar believes, and her study attempts to show, that "Catholic and Shi'i women... are doing something innovative within their communities that is important to even a secular understanding of women's flourishing."(xviii)

Bucar structures her study somewhat loosely around five themes at the heart of women's religious lives, ranging from the more pious and personal (e.g. spiritual role models and child rearing) toward the more social and political (e.g. embodied public practices and civil activism). Each theme constitutes a chapter; each chapter develops both an Iranian and Catholic case study connected to the broader theme; each case study consists of a clerically authoritative opinion offered by either the Ayatollah Khomeini or Pope John Paul II on a specific issue, and in turn an engagement with that rhetoric by a prominent woman in each tradition; each engagement demonstrates how women work tactically with the clerical opinion, neither purely and passively submitting to it nor rejecting it outright, but rather reshaping it (to a greater or lesser degree depending on the example) to better fit women's experiences and needs. In the process, the tradition is accepted yet transformed.

The topics of the ten case studies include issues such as: compulsory hijab (i.e. Iranian laws requiring women to wear the veil); Catholic teaching on abortion; interpretations of Mary, Fatimah, and Hagar; religious and secular clashes in the U.S. over family planning; and the scope and style of women's publications in the Iranian media. Two of the more fascinating case studies were the 2003 reform of child custody laws in Iran (under chapter two's theme of child-rearing and motherhood) and the creation of the conservative Catholic woman's group, Woman for Faith and Family (WFF), in 1984 (under chapter four's theme of embodied practices). In these two cases, women tactically engage the rhetoric of essentialist gender roles promoted by clerical authorities, redeploying that rhetoric to expand their range of self-determination and better serve women's needs.

In the Shi'i case study, Iranian custody laws after the 1979 Islamic Revolution favored the father, such that in situations of divorce he gained custody of sons two years of age and daughters seven years of age. In 2003, the women's movement in Iran, arguing precisely that the primacy of the mothering role so fully endorsed by Ayatollah Khomeini in other contexts should also apply here, succeeded in gaining custody for mothers of both daughters and sons up until age seven. In the Catholic case study, conservative convert Helen Hitchcock helped draft a 1984 Catholic women's affirmation of the Roman Catholic policy restricting priesthood to men, and created the WFF in part to gather support for the statement. In the process, the WFF became a source for providing Catholic women guidance on moral, spiritual, and religious issues, as well as a female support system. In other words, the WFF became a women-centered community of distinctly female pastoral moral reflection, bypassing direct clerical control and thereby moving "ethical work from the clergy... to lay women who have no formal training and base their advice on their experiences as Catholic women." (117).

One problem with the book is that the case studies are widely divergent in terms of their location on the conformity-to-creativity spectrum. The asymmetry among the case studies poses problems for both reader expectations and Bucar's argument. Bucar makes clear that her intended focus is not outright dissent, rejection, or rebellion against the tradition, but rather the tactical middle ground of those women working within, and thus accepting as a framework, the basic presuppositions of the tradition itself. The Iranian case studies all fit this description, but arguably the majority of Catholic case studies do not. The more radical approaches of African American womanist theologian Diana Hayes, the Latina *mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Catholics For Choice leader Frances Kissling seem to burst the bounds of conformity altogether. Helen Hitchcock, noted above, is the only Catholic example with a clearly conformist dimension. Even Lisa Cahill, who is unquestionably the most middle ground figure of the five, nevertheless can be categorized as a dissenting moral theologian in a way that none of the Iranian women figures could, or would, claim to be. To a certain extent this is not surprising, since the Iranian case studies work within the stricter confines of the Iranian legal system, a context quite different than the voluntary religious participation of U.S. Catholics. Still, the result is that, with the exception of Hitchcock and maybe Cahill, the Catholic case studies seem at times drastically

asymmetrical to the Iranian examples, and thus less satisfying to the reader based on the expectations Bucar herself raises with her own methodology.

A moderately liberal Catholic reader like myself, getting into the spirit of Bucar's self-reflective approach, hoped to follow her lead, namely, to tamp down my own biases and expand my view of fellow Catholics who may shade more toward the conformist end of the spectrum. This does not necessarily require five examples on the order of Hitchcock, but one thinks at least of the fascinating traditional/progressive blends of figures like Dorothy Day, or, to take a 20th Century male example, John Courtney Murray (no surprise that neither is easily pigeon-holed into the Catholic right or left). The point is not that Bucar should have used Dorothy Day, but simply that her title and methodology raised expectations of significantly more substantial conformity than most of her Catholic examples provide. For instance, Bucar eventually admits, weakly, that at best Hayes "can be considered *citational* of John Paul"(48, emphasis mine) but not much more, that Isasi-Diaz "is emphatic, in fact, that papal teachings are not relevant to Latina women"(86), and that Kissling, if she had her druthers, "wouldn't necessarily use church documents as [her] touchstone."(139). To categorize these leading Catholic women as examples of conformity to clerical teachings seems to stretch the meaning of the term to the breaking point, and Bucar's attempts to retain the symmetry, as when she asserts that both Kissling and her Iranian case-study counterpart Sherkat "remain *to some extent* within the parameters the clerics set up" (152, emphasis mine) seem like verbal spackle, more a patch job than a true fix.

Bucar no doubt has possible responses to this sort of criticism, and two come immediately to mind, one explicit in the text and the other implicit, relating to her potential readership. Explicitly, Bucar does note that even though most of her Catholic women can be understood in their larger work to move beyond conformity and into rejection of clerical views, she is nevertheless examining specific instances of their rhetoric in which some aspect of conformity is evident. So, for example, though Kissling dissents publicly and actively from the church's current teaching against abortion, Bucar focuses on Kissling's attempt to challenge those of her pro-choice political allies who refuse to attribute any value at all to the fetus. To argue that the living fetus has at least some value, even if not absolute, indicates a creative fusion of traditional Catholic teachings and liberal feminist views, thereby opening a middle ground in the public debate that typically remains polarized by absolutists. And similarly with the other rather radical Catholic examples, the analytic focus is on some particular aspect of shared traditional language.

This leads to the second of Bucar's possible responses, namely, that "conformity" depends on the vantage point of the reader. As Bucar notes at the beginning of the book, for many secular feminists any positive relationship whatsoever to religious traditions like Roman Catholicism or Iranian Shi'i Islam may be presumed indefensible on feminist grounds. What is "radical" in the theological world, then, may well be seen as merely conformist from a secular feminist vantage point, and indeed Bucar is attempting to make the case to just this audience that it is indeed "creative" conformity at work among these religious women. Granting this, it

nevertheless places an implicit requirement on the reader to have bifocals at the ready when considering the intended audience of any particular case study.

Though not competent to comment on Muslim ethics generally or *shari'a* specifically, I do think the book makes helpful contributions to the fields of moral philosophy, Christian ethics, and comparative religious ethics. Before describing them, however, a caveat is in order. Throughout the book Bucar repeatedly claims that the women in the case studies contribute “to the production of ethical knowledge within religious communities” (xvi), a rather bold and even jarring claim given the state of post-modern epistemology, which severely contests the meaningfulness of any claim to ‘truth,’ most especially in the moral realm. Depending on one’s view, Bucar’s blunt affirmation concerning the ‘production of moral knowledge’ will be seen as either refreshing or problematic. In either case, it would have helped had she more fully developed and defended, in the main text, her use of this phrase, especially given her widespread use of post-modern thinkers and jargon (see below). This concern duly noted, her contributions to the philosophical and religious moral discussion deserve mention.

Bucar’s use of Stephen Toulmin’s categories for analyzing the structure of practical moral arguments (claim, ground, warrant, backing, etc.) is especially helpful in two ways. First, his categories serve as an effective comparative tool for identifying specific similarities and differences between the Islamic and Catholic moral perspectives, and thus provide a basis for interreligious study and dialogue. Second, Toulmin’s categories also help illuminate the integrity of intra-religious argumentation—that such argumentation can have rules, structure, and meaningful outcomes, much like a game (in a non-pejorative sense). Bucar shows this especially in the Iranian context. Religious disagreement within a tradition need not reduce to arbitrary manipulation, power plays, frozen standoffs or blind obedience (though sadly these always lurk). Instead, the rhetorical back and forth between clerics and women turns on diverse and competing interpretations of shared religious values, and Toulmin’s categories bring into relief with great specificity the ‘plays’ or moves made. The various successes of the Iranian women’s arguments reveal not only a certain kind of religious practical rationality at work but also the shared accountability of both players in the game (clerics and women) to the tradition itself. In short, the case studies at times reveal a kind of living integrity internal to a tradition—the ability of a religion to change without losing its basic identity.

A further contribution Bucar makes to moral philosophy and Christian ethics, very much related to the preceding paragraph, is an enriched and complex version of moral agency. Her contribution here, however, in spite of her attempted neologism (“dianomy”), is not particularly ground-breaking, but more properly seen as helpful back-filling for a decades-old discussion of virtue, narrative, and communitarian ethics. Her examples from both traditions persuasively demonstrate meaningful moral agency *within* a religious community, as opposed to the abstract, stripped-down, individual Kantian version of moral autonomy that has so dominated modern liberal values. Put differently, rather than seeing religion as simply an external authoritarian threat to individual freedom—and so a stark either-or choice between subservient obedience or

adult liberty—Bucar’s case studies show the innovation, integration, and even “artistry” (178) of creative conformity through participation in a religious tradition. One is reminded of an old Jazz musician’s line: You have to have something to improvise *on*. Her book ratifies the perception that an authentically religious life is one of *interpretation*—creative choices within parameters—an insight commonplace to scholars and practitioners of religion though sadly lost on many secular moderns. A good deal of blame for this widespread secular misperception, of course, rests with the heavy-handed rhetoric of religious authorities themselves (how many times have U.S. Catholic bishops, for example, demeaned and denigrated ‘cafeteria Catholicism’?), posing religious choice as single-minded conformity rather than adult, interpretive participation. One of the great contributions of Bucar’s book is precisely to show the difference. As all this applies to feminism specifically, Bucar concludes: “... religious women are shifting the debate from one of opposition (religion versus feminism) to one of transformation (religious feminisms).” (176)

Bucar’s text is better suited to graduate level, scholarly readers than to undergraduates or a more widely popular audience. It is a methodologically complex text rich in detail and careful argumentation, and bears scholarly fruit. The *au courant* academic jargon is thick (we ‘interrogate,’ we ‘negotiate,’ we ‘gaze,’ we ‘map the contours of the discursive field,’ etc.), made thicker by Bucar’s neologisms such as ‘dianomy’ and ‘republication.’ It reads like a revised dissertation. We can hope, however, that given our contemporary cultural blind spot to the living internal diversity of religious traditions and the capacity to live meaningful and creative lives within them, Bucar will make efforts to share the fruits of her study on multiple levels of readership, including the popular. In the meantime, for those who may be deterred by the methodical structure and high academic language of the book, it is possible simply to go directly to the case studies themselves, bypassing most of the Introduction (except for the brief biographical sections on Ayatollah Khomeini and John Paul II, which are fascinating and accessible) and Conclusion of the book, as well as the introduction and conclusion of each chapter itself. There is still much to be gained by the non-scholar within the body of each chapter.

Alluding to the non-scholar, perhaps, brings us to a fitting final thought. Bucar’s book is a high academic analysis of arguments that occur on a sub-scholarly, i.e. more popular, level. Her central focus is the religious rhetoric of clerical leaders and religious women’s tactical response to that rhetoric. Rhetoric is persuasive speech or writing intended for a specific audience. For Roman Catholicism and Iranian Shi’i Islam, clerically based rhetoric functions as an attempt to bridge the gap between elite religious leadership (and the intellectual traditions that form it) on the one hand, and the average member, so to speak, of the religious community on the other. This gap is itself telling, as the very existence of such rhetoric indicates that religious “obedience” is by no means guaranteed, even in authoritarian traditions like these. To put it bluntly, “followers” do not always follow, and when they do, they may well move in a somewhat different direction than that originally proposed by the clerical authority. The need for rhetorical exchange between leaders and the ‘rank and file’ reveals that religious participation, as with any

other institutional context (be it political, cultural, or academic) occurs through a complex process of conversation and exchange. This is both a sociological necessity, as Peter Berger showed so long ago now in his *Sacred Canopy*, and a constant theological opportunity. Far from static and monolithic, religious traditions live and change, often through the clever and courageous agency of those not officially in power. Elizabeth Bucar's *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women* opens a much needed window onto this process.