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THE VATICAN WAR ON NUNS: DRESS AND VIEWS OF RELIGION

It should be no revelation to note that men have used dress as a means for asserting their dominance over women. Dress has symbolized women's place in society perhaps as long as there has been society. In general, of course, one's manner of dress symbolizes and advertises social position. However, I mean more than merely class or status here when I speak of masculine assertion of dominance over women. I mean the assertion of power, the right to that power, and as part of that right the innate privilege of exercising choice regarding what should be done in society. As part of that right, standards of purity and modesty hold a superior and integral place.

Consequently, changes in style, as Richardson and Kroeber (1940) noted, often signal changes in social relationships and may threaten the status quo. The changes resulting from the Second Vatican Church Council, usually termed Vatican II, stirred strong support as well as opposition. Generally, those who supported the change believe they have not gone far enough while those who oppose them consider that they have gone too far. Granted there are people in between these poles, some of whom are confused and others who pay no attention to the changes. Whatever the general public feels consciously, the fact remains that dress does indeed make the man – and the woman too.

A few year ago, I wrote

An exploration that focuses on the body goes far in understanding the distinctive place that a particular people have in the world. Moore (1994, p. 17), for example, states 'Bodies. It all has to do with bodies.' She argues for a movement beyond the obvious male-female differences in body toward an embodied concord and correspondence. Examination of the manner in which bodies are displayed in the Polynesian Cultural Center has moved us toward her position. The differences in the conception of the body's meaning between Mormons and Polynesians, moreover, has alerted us to the manner in which 'physicality' is used in the politics of local hermeneutics (Brucche-Due, 1993). Attention to the use of the body at the Polynesian Cultural Center, furthermore, reinforces the phenomenological fact that real people are involved in manipulating their bodies to make statements about their own experiences within cultural contexts.

In Lock's (1993) perceptive argument they are using a resocialized body to express their independence. This body has created itself through the use of subjective emotions in 'dialogue with or subjugated by social practice and knowledge' (Worthman, 1993, p. 161). Lock exhorts subjugated people to resist all pressures from the Other to productively answer and 'Just so stories' (1993, p. 148). In other words, she calls for a raising of consciousness about what has happened to them and for them to seek a means to define their own identities through a 'dialogue' with their own bodily and cultural experiences. Lock reminds us that, going back to Durkheim, there is a social science tradition that has approached the problem of the body in a manner seeking to understand the relationship between the 'universal physical body and the 'higher' morally-imbued 'socialized' body' (Lock 1993, p. 135; Durkheim 1961). This tradition has yielded useful insights through Mauss (1935) and Van Gennep (1960), both of whom insisted on the relationship between physical, psychosocial and social domains. Additionally, Van Gennep's work on ritual demonstrated that body techniques relate closely to the way in which culture maps time and space (Salamone 1999: 68-69).

Thus, it is obvious that there has been a long tradition of looking at the body to discover the way in which society orders the placement of its members. Moreover, interpretation of the body in societies is a means to achieve and control subjugation of people, often women.

Work on the manner in which clothing fits into this placement is relatively new. Linda Arthur (1999, ed.; Linda Arthur 2000) has made significant strides in underscoring the manner in which religions use dress to subjugate women. In her synopsis to her chapter, *Religion and Dress*, she writes

From Islam to Confucianism to Voodoo, dress plays a pivotal role in religious expression. This book investigates how dress symbolically evidences both religious and social systems across a wide range of cultures - from Africa and South America to Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Caribbean. In some of these cultures, dress is part of a system of social control. Gender issues feature prominently since the control of female sexuality is often of great importance to the world's religions.

One more quotation helps set the stage for my discussion. The description of *Religion, Dress and the Body* states:

Religions constrain the bodies of their members through dress. . . . Most interestingly, perhaps, dress is a measure of one's level of commitment to the community. . . . In order to control sexuality, women's bodies in particular are constrained in religious communities in terms of emotional expression, diet, and especially dress.

The case of what some call "The Vatican War on Nuns" fits this category (Vatican waging a war on nuns. CAROL MARIN cmarin@suntimes.com April 20, 2012 7:40 PM).

The Vatican and Nuns

On October 11, 1963, Vatican II met for the first time. The changes it brought about still continue fifty years later and do the reactions against those

changes. (See *Vatican II Changed The Catholic Church — And The World* http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/vatican-ii-catholic-church-changes_n_1956641.html and *Vatican II Heresies* <http://www.mostholymonastery.com/?gclid=CKrmja-9yLkCFehxOgodZU0ANQ>). It has been difficult for Catholics, especially practicing Catholics, to remain neutral in the midst of the periodic disputes regarding the Council and its decisions, particularly those touching on the role of the Church in the modern world. Some feel that popes after John XXII have betrayed the Council and its hopes. Others have seen the Council itself as a betrayal, and some see it as heretical. Much of the rhetoric has focused on the role of nuns in the subsequent years. This recent statement from the Huffington Post sums up the problem rather neatly.

As time went by, many nuns shucked their voluminous habits in favor of clothes similar to those worn by the people they served. And men and women in religious orders started taking on causes, even risking arrest, when they spoke out in favor of civil rights and workers' rights and against the war in Vietnam.

Such changes represented an about-face from the church's defensive approach to the world before Vatican II, said Christopher Baglow, a theology professor at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans.

This engagement with the world upset many in the Church, even those who purported to support the teachings of Vatican II. Those openly conservative and opposed to the Council's teachings set up their own "Catholic" Churches, teaching the old pre-Vatican II ideas and promoting the old-time religion of yore.

For those in the Church and in its hierarchy who wanted to stop or slow down the pace of change, nuns made safer targets for their wrath. Thus, while the odious misbehaviour of priests went unpunished and hidden for years the subject of what nuns wore came more into the forefront and under attack. The Huffington Post article has stated the matter succinctly.

Not all the changes brought about by Vatican II have been welcomed, and many would say there haven't been enough changes regarding the status of women. This spring, the Vatican orthodoxy watchdog launched a full-scale overhaul of the largest umbrella group of American nuns, accusing the group of taking positions that undermine church teaching and promoting several "radical feminist themes" that are incompatible with Catholic teachings.

I find it significant that the issues of change – how much or how little – should focus on women and their dress. It is not necessary to roll out the overwhelming evidence of the connection of sexuality and sanctity, especially in the minds of men. A short list would include Arthur 1999 and 2000; Douglas 1966; Fink 1992; Morton 1991; Hester 1992; Rappoport 2012; Phillips 2000; Klawans, 2006; GILL 2005 Gil 1993; BODDY 1982; Burban 1988; Honig and Hershatter 1988.; Pateman 1988; Jacobs and Landgraf 1991; Field 1983; and

Finnström 2009. The literature also supports the notion that under the stress of change, especially change that threatens male dominance. Restrictions on women increase as they are blamed for the change and its consequences. A symbol of that change is often dress. The actions of many in the hierarchy demonstrate these very concepts.

The irony here is that as a group nuns have probably implemented the changes of Vatican II more completely than any other group. They have taken its call to enter into a dialogue with the world seriously and have become deeply involved in projects to better that world. They have figured prominently in Civil Rights cases, the rights of women, anti-war causes, immigrant rights actions and numerous other movements to promote social justice in line not only with Vatican II but with age-old Catholic teachings. However, their very leadership may have been the cause of the anger they found in the hierarchy. The general situation is summed up here in a quote from Sister Nancy Sylvester. “I did exactly what the church asked me—and now, the church is looking at me like, where have you come from...who are you?” The quote comes from a movie *Band of Sisters*. The movie is “about the remarkable transformation of Catholic nuns in the United States since Vatican II of the 1960s, and the reaction of some members of the church hierarchy who oppose their changes. Perhaps more than any other group, U.S. nuns embraced Vatican II’s call to serve where there was the greatest need (Band of Sisters <http://www.bandofsistersmovie.com/vatican-ii> First Accessed September 18, 2013).”

The renewal of Catholic nuns in line with Vatican II brought about conditions which may have warmed the heart of John XXIII and which were in conformity with the directions of Paul VI to find renewal in the works of the founders of the religious orders of the nuns but which has seemingly struck terror into the hearts of conservative members of the hierarchy, a hierarchy many of whose members have brought scandal to the church. The good sisters have shocked the conservative hierarchy through actions such as the following: to protest social injustice, many sisters wrote their government representatives, seeking change in the laws. Many appeared before government committees to testify for change. Some of the sister ran for and held public office. Others were jailed for engaging in acts of civil disobedience. NETWORK, a national social justice lobby, infuriated conservative Catholics who felt that social justice somehow was against Catholic teachings. Perhaps, the support of nuns for Obama’s Affordable Health Care Law and their Bus Ride against conservative Catholic Senator Paul Ryan’s economic proposals were the final straws in the eyes of conservatives. Certainly, the “nuns on the bus” tour brought a great deal of publicity to the activism of nuns and contrasted with the reclusive nuns many of them knew from the 1950s. Those nuns stayed in the background and separated themselves from the “World” to attain holiness.

Such gestures opposing the views of conservative Catholics who had remained in the church as well as the aging and increasingly conservative

clergy led to a number of counter moves on the part of the then very conservative Vatican.

In early 2009, U.S. nuns learned they were to be subjected to two unprecedented investigations from Rome: an Apostolic Visitation of approximately 340 active congregations, and a doctrinal assessment of LCWR, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents 80% of the 57,000 sisters in the U.S. In response to this reining in by the church, sisters in the U.S. now see themselves fighting on two fronts: to change and help heal the world, and to preserve their freedom to do so (Band of Sisters <http://www.bandofsistersmovie.com/vatican-ii> First Accessed September 18, 2013).

The harsh measures have drawn attacks from liberal Catholics who support the causes of the nuns. Unfortunately, early indications are that Francis I, in whom the nuns hoped they would have a defender has failed to support them. Francis has even criticized them for paying too much attention to social justice and neglecting to attack abortion. The “reform” of the LCWR under the direction of the conservative archbishop of Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain. Part of the reform movement is to be to get the nuns back into their habits.

As an article reporting on the meeting between representatives of American nuns and the Vatican notes

As the Vatican further sees the LCWR’s crackdown, what they fail to recognize is that the group had managed to uplift the image of the Church within the U.S., through their social justice work, especially at a time when it was embroiled in scandals over sexual abuse of minors. And while the Vatican has expressed gratitude for the nuns’ contributions, their actions and criticism have undermined the work they’ve done for social justice (Pope Francis Cracks Down on Nuns <http://www.policymic.com/articles/35139/pope-francis-cracks-down-on-u-s-nuns> First Accessed September 18, 2013)

A supporter of the conservative stance wrote

Maybe they should review the vow of obedience they took. See that is the problem with the American Church, they think they can do whatever they want. These women don’t even dress like nuns. They promote liberal ideas in opposition to Church teaching, and when the Holy Father calls them on it, instead of being obedient they protest (Protester Back Nuns in Standoff with Vatican http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/24/protesters-back-us-nuns_n_1543497.html First Accessed September 18, 2013).

Note the connection with obedience to men and proper dress. To dress like a nun in this view is to go back to the sometimes bizarre habits familiar in the 1950s and Bing Crosby movies. It is a version of women should be seen and not heard. Real nuns dress in a manner set apart, in styles reminiscent of strict Muslims while men, including priests, can dress comfortably and fit in, if they want, with everyone else in the society.

Women, however, are not to be allowed to fit in with everyone. The patriarchal bias still exists. Nuns, however, are the easiest target. The fact that patriarchy has led to scandals in every age of the church does little to

give pause to many of the hierarchy. The pedophilic scandals that many believe have led to the closing of parish churches and schools have notoriously been swept aside. The focus on birth control, anti-abortion and homophobia have substituted for religion in many dioceses. One quote is appropriate here.

So I say to the Vatican—shame! You, who perpetrated a worldwide crime against children and covered it up for years, are a disgrace. If the nuns had been running the church instead of you that scandal would not have happened (Caryl Rivers Vatican's Attack on Nuns Reopens Old Wounds <http://www.forbes.com/sites/womensnews/2012/05/15/caryl-rivers-condemns-vatican-for-attack-on-nuns/2/> First Accessed September 18, 2013).

Rivers's brother had been abused by a Christian Brother and later committed suicide a victim of church neglect and cover-up and Ronald Reagan's draconian policies, leading to cuts of essential mental health programs.

Purity and Danger

Mary Douglas's seminal book, *Purity and Danger* offers a theoretical grounding for the stress on dressing like a nun that runs through many of the attacks on American Catholic nuns. She also provides an understanding of why the refusal of many nuns to dress like a nun, that is, to return to the dress of the 1950s and earlier, is so dangerous to those in control. In a brilliant passage she notes,

So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power (Mary Douglas, 2012 (originally 1966), p. 117).

Danger and power – concepts understandably upsetting to those who seek to maintain the status quo. The nuns who oppose blind obedience and dress accordingly present a threat to the Vatican control of what it means to be a Catholic. Women in general threaten male dominance unless they are controlled. The old order requires the control of existing patterns. These patterns are kept in place by a certain form of dress, among other symbols.

Usually the dress is that of females, connecting the idea of purity with dress and its violation with power, its maintenance or loss. Those defenders of the old order use the word “dirty” to describe the dress or behaviour as a literal or metaphorical epithet against those who signify through their dress and appearance their opposition to the status quo. Leach (1976), according to Kyong Kim, finds boundaries as dirty categories. Thus, long hair can be a symbol of “dirt”, since it is often a boundary between various categories and therefore often described as dirty or even filthy, as in “long-hair hippy freaks” of the sixties. Of course, short hair can also mark what is proper or improper. Short hair for nuns was proper because it set them apart. While wearing their hair a normal societally approved length may mark them as “dirty” or

“improper” because their status may be anomalous. People may not know how to react to religious figures who dress as they do. I shall return to this point in the conclusion.

So dirt and danger mark boundaries and can also form anomalous categories. Of these categories Elyada has written

Alongside the binary categories, which are based on a dichotomous array of two notions, there are also anomalous categories, namely conceptual categories that contain elements from both poles. Thus, for example, vis-à-vis the binary pair man/god there is the anomalous category of the angel, which possesses qualities of both man and god. The anomalous categories are typified by a surplus of meaning, they are more intricate and possess a higher semiotic power; therefore they endanger the binary basis of the meaning constituting categories of a given culture. Thus, every culture tries to control these categories by defining them as “taboo” or “sacred” categories. At times, the anomalous category functions as a link between two poles perceived as scary and dangerous: thus, for example, the figure of Christ is an anomalous category of sanctity, linking the earthly and the heavenly, just as the figure of the vampire links the living with the dead (<http://art-gallery.haifa.ac.il/raw-cooked/pdf/elyada-e.pdf> Accessed September 23, 2013).

Just so, modern nuns may be seen to be an anomalous category neither set aside from the world nor fully in it but “betwixt and between” in Victor Turner’s words (1995). Their ambiguous position certainly signals danger to the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis I in his otherwise welcoming and progressive speech on the Church today presents a view of women very much rooted in the past in which I grew up.

I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of ‘female *machismo*,’ because a woman has a different make-up than a man. But what I hear about the role of women is often inspired by an ideology of *machismo*. Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church. Mary, a woman, is more important than the bishops. I say this because we must not confuse the function with the dignity. We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church. The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions. The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church (A Big Heart Open to God, America <http://www.americamagazine.org/> Accessed September 23, 2013)

Perhaps, given his generous and kind nature Pope Francis sought to reassure American nuns. It certainly was a softer approach than other recent manifestos from the Vatican. However, feminists, including feminists have long noted that the pedestal is a prison of its own. The insistence of nature over nurture

is also a rather outmoded concept both in social science and in social life. The pope also has not changed those conservative prelates in charge of reining in the progressive nuns, leading skeptics to note that actions do indeed speak louder than words.

Conclusion

Matter out of place is dangerous and consequently impure (Douglas, 50). Douglas is here paraphrasing William James (1901-02, orig. 1995:129). Her point is that what others may consider dirty is often not dirty within a culture, or subculture for that matter. Context defines what is out of place and therefore dirty. Thus, dirt is not in itself a hygienic question; it is a cultural one, that is, a symbolic question. Simply put, that which is anomalous and ambiguous is problematic and dangerous. It not only does not fit the pattern, it threatens the pattern. It casts doubt on the category within the pattern and seeks to establish a new pattern to replace the old. Therefore, it is dangerous to the keepers of the flame; that is, the Old Guard.

Nuns acting like concerned citizens, even concerned Catholics following the social teachings of their Church, present problems to those who perceive the role of nuns to be subservient to the male hierarchy or to be somehow in a set apart sanctified place above ordinary humans; namely, men, who must get their hands dirty. Any Catholic raised in the period up to Vatican II knows of the dirt obsession of the Catholic Church of that period. Sex was dirty and at best a necessary evil even between spouses. It was for procreation and not recreation as we were told. There were restrictions on sex, even in marriage. Even as many challenged these teachings, their very challenge put sex into a separate category. Moreover, men were considered weak while women were of a higher nature on the one hand but also dangerous to weak and frail men.

Note, there were many priests who opposed this view, usually privately and pastorally. However, the hierarchy generally held to this view of purity. Even when Paul VI's own panel found that artificial birth control was not sinful he condemned it, partially to affirm papal infallibility (New Birth Control Commission Papers Reveal Vatican's Hand. National Catholic Reporter: Bishop Accountability.Org.) Moreover, the article notes that even the much-revered John XXIII did not want Vatican II deciding the issue of birth control, fearing it would put papal infallibility in doubt.

Arising almost simultaneously with challenges to the condemnation of birth control by the male hierarchy, the abandonment of many sisters, priests, and brothers of the clerical life, the movement of nuns into the secular struggles, which Vatican II had recommended helped fuel conservative, indeed reactionary, fears and provided a convenient struggle to the hierarchy who wanted women to dress and act as nuns; that is, the good sisters of the 1950s

and Bing Crosby films. Thus, the dress of nuns could serve to demonstrate that the hierarchy was preserving the core of Catholicism in the 21st Century even while maintaining the reforms of Vatican II. It also was a means to distract attention from the misbehaviour of errant priests and the cover ups of dilatory bishops of their odious behavior and betrayal of sacred trust. In sum, the wearing a head dress and long black dresses seemed more important than living up to one's moral obligations and not molesting children. Their hypocrisy of their actions in the eyes of many Catholics and disdain of many of other faiths appears lost on the Old Guard. To them the matter of a nun's dress and her descent from the pedestal is more important than a passionate embrace of life and social justice.

The action is reminiscent of the Grand Inquisitor's in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Kindle Location 6). He must kill Jesus to save his Church. It is a cynical move in which the institution's survival is placed above the needs of the people it should serve. It is a sociological truism that institutions exist to keep themselves alive. Other functions take a back seat to mere survival. Douglas puts it more delicately in the following paragraph.

To conclude, if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognise this is the first step towards insight into pollution. It involves us in no clearcut distinction between sacred and secular. The same principle applies throughout. Furthermore, it involves no special distinction between primitives and moderns: we are all subject to the same rules. But in the primitive culture the rule of patterning works with greater force and more total comprehensiveness. With the moderns it applies to disjointed, separate areas of existence.

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