Contesting the spiritual space: Patriarchy, Nureaucracy, and the gendering of women's religious orders

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Abstract (Article Summary)

Mills and Ryan focus on Catholic women's religious orders and relate the legacy of their evolution, and the external forces which shaped them, to the present crises being experienced in such organizations. The authors draw conclusions not only for women inside Catholic religious orders, but for the understanding of management and organizing in general, among other things.

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ABSTRACT

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This paper focuses on (Catholic) women's religious orders and relates the legacy of their evolution, and the external forces which shaped them, to the present crises (of meaning, of an aging and decreasing number of members, and a dwindling number of new recruits) being experienced in such organizations. Drawing upon rules theory (Clegg, 1981; Helms Mills & Mills, 2000; Mills, 1988) and feminist postmodernist analysis (Acker, 1992; Burrell, 1992; Ferguson, 1984), the paper sets out (i) to analyse the relationship between the organizational crises experienced by the women's religious orders and their etiology, rooted as they are in male-dominant worldviews and bureaucratic structures; and (ii) to identify processes and practices which contribute to the ability of such orders to develop change strategies that are more in line with their spiritual, as opposed to their organizational, roots. The paper draws conclusions not only for women inside Catholic religious orders, but for our understanding of management and organizing in general. It concludes that the Roman Catholic Church has profoundly influenced our notions of management and of the organization as a corporate entity, and in ways that are deeply gendered. It also argues

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that for female religious, a strategy of change may lie in developing their own discourses in ways that contribute to a redefined liminal space.

INTRODUCTION

Women's religious orders are among the oldest, if not the oldest, forms of women-only organizations in the West. Throughout history, they have played a significant part in providing liberated environments for the women who joined them (Byrne, 1984; Sheldrake, 1991; Williamson, 1979). Present-day examples of these organizations, however, experience an increasing divergence between compliance (Etzioni, 1975) with the church's patriarchal legal system (Burrell, 1992; Sheldrake, 1991) and the freedom to choose structures and develop organizational and management styles which are more relevant both for the members and the organizational environment of the late twentieth-century. This has led to crisis in women's religious orders as members have sought to reconcile changing environmental realities with established religious laws embedded within the very structures of their orders.

The history of women's religious orders is one of contest and reconciliation with male dominated Church hierarchies. The growth of women's groups, in terms of both adherents and influence, began to be significant at around the time when the Church hierarchies were beginning to feel a need for legislation to control practices and behaviours both by clergy and laity, and the body of material now known as Canon Law was drawn up (Ireland, 1995). The monastic model of religious life was widely adopted and women's groups were strongly encouraged to take it up; indeed, they were required, for patriarchal concerns rather than the original motive of `safeguarding spiritual space' (Sheldrake, 1991), to adopt enclosure. Gradually, greater powers were given to (male) church authorities to govern the lives of religious institutes, particularly those of women, than had been the case in previous times. This process had a cumulative effect so that eventually clerical men effectively controlled the lifestyle, honorarium, and structure of religious institutes. The consequences of this were farreaching for women's groups, because the very minutiae of their lives were laid down in ways which did not happen for men's groups.

There are many women's religious institutes which have had to adopt a structure that diverge from the model preferred at the time of foundation. For those which were forced to make radical changes, there are many more whose founders simply reworked what they knew was within the bounds of acceptability, submitting to greater restrictions on mobility and lifestyle than they would have liked.

Discontentment with hierarchical rules and changes within the Catholic Church over the last six decades have contributed to a crisis within women's religious orders. While the Second Vatican Council enjoined upon all religious institutes the necessity of going back to their roots, radically reshaping their lives and structures to be more in line with the vision of their founder (Flannery, 1996), it has become impossible to fully separate what has been a requirement of law (and an accretion of history) from what the founder truly wanted, unless organizational documents testify to any distinction. The trajectory of women's groups through history has meant that original purposes and freedoms have been submerged, and the reasons for some practices even subverted (Byrne, 1984).

Combining an 'insider' (Ryan) with an 'outsider' (Mills) perspective, the researchers analyze the relationship between junctures of meta-rules and organizational structure (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000), with the aim of (i) shedding light on the relationship between combinations of religious ideas and organization and the shaping of women's religious groups and the notion of womanhood, (ii) identifying possibilities for change within such organizations and, in the process, (iii) drawing lessons for a broader understanding of the relationship between organizational change and female emancipation (Ferguson, 1984; Witz & Savage, 1992).

A CRISIS OF NUMBERS

The Roman Catholic Church is in the midst of an organizational crisis, a crisis which, in the words of one commentator, 'is a malaise that has been increasing noticeably over the last thirty years, but it has reached dangerous proportions only since the beginning of the 1950s" (Bernstein, 1976). In its most visible organizational form, the crisis is manifest in numbers or, more accurately, dwindling numbers of nuns and priests. Twenty years ago Marcelle Bernstein (1976:305), commenting on what the religious press called the 'vocation crisis', argued that, "The future of religious communities of women is threatened by two facts. Fewer and fewer girls are entering religious life. And, every year, more and more sisters are leaving".

Today, literally thousands of nuns are leaving their convents every year. Few are replacing them. As early as 1975, the Vatican was announcing that the number of Catholic nuns in the world had fallen by almost twenty-- five percent over the previous four years (cf. Bernstein, 1976:316-7). The trend has continued to worsen since. In the UK, for example, the number of women who become nuns dropped from around one-hundred fifty new entrants each year in the 1940s to just twelve in 1994, the last time statistics were recorded. The fall was even more marked for the 'closed-door' contemplative orders (Barroclough, 1997).

The declining numbers of nuns (as well as priests and monks) is a continuing trend. But, as Sheldrake (1993: 35) has contended, "the present crisis ... [cannot] be interpreted merely as a problem of clerical numbers rather than a question of meaning." Beneath the numbers are deep-rooted issues that have farreaching implications, not only for the future of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, but for the individuals and groups who live the religious life[2] that is a central aspect of that institution, and also for broader notions of femininity, masculinity, and organizational life that have an impact far beyond the immediate reach of the Church.

A QUESTION OF MEANING

What is at the heart of the crisis, what is the "crisis of meaning" that Sheldrake (1993:26) refers to? For some, like Sister Mary Bernadette, it is simply a question of image: "We do have an image problem. And maybe we helped to create it. We do lock ourselves away, but it's a noisy world out there and you want space for a prayerful life" (quoted in Barroclough, 1997). Others, such as Sister Gabriel, contend that the decline is, in part, 'due to the State taking over many of the nuns' traditional roles, such as running orphanages and teaching and acting as social workers, thus taking away the job potential for many women contemplating convent life' (Barroclough, 1997). Yet others, like Mother Joanna, believe that a decline in social values is to blame for the demise of the Church: "[T]here's no sense of purpose in society anymore. People don't commit themselves to marriage, and they have the same attitude towards a religious vocation" (quoted in Barroclough, 1997). For Fr. Martin Currie, the Vicar General of the Halifax Archdiocese in Nova Scotia (Canada), the closure of churches is linked to the issue of celibacy, which he contends is a `disciplinary rule' rather than a basic tenet of the Church's dogma (see Frank, 1997).

Together these issues of image, enclosure, state intervention, changing social values, and celibacy all have a bearing on the underlying crisis of meaning within the Catholic Church. A superficial analysis of each of these issues might suggest that resolve lies in the development of a new image (or images) of religious life which takes account of changing social values by modifying or abandoning many of the rules of religious life, particularly in regard to enclosure and celibacy. Indeed, these questions are being discussed within religious communities themselves. In recent years, a number of orders have used various means to improve the image of nuns. The Sisters of Our Lady of Grace and Compassion, for example, was the first order in Britain to advertise regularly in the Catholic press (Bernstein, 1976), and recently the Association of Contemplative Nuns used a poster campaign to recruit new members to the various orders (Barroclough, 1997).

Digging beneath the surface, however, we find that image, enclosure, state intervention, changing social values, and celibacy combine in the creation of a spiritual space which has over centuries shaped not only the identity of the Church but of the 'women' and 'men' who constitute its religious life. To unravel this configuration of rules (Mills, 1988) is to question deep-rooted notions of masculinity and femininity that characterize not only the nuns, priests, and monks who directly bear those gendered identities, but the gendered understandings which permeate much of organizational life in the West (Burrell, 1992). We do not undertake the process lightly; real people are struggling with issues that affect their very being. Our concern is three-fold: (i) to contribute to the postmodern feminist debate on the relationship between discursive practices and gendered identities (Weedon, 1993); (ii) to identify immediate strategies of change for those actively involved in transforming religious life within the Catholic Church; and (iii) to contribute to the literature on gender and organizations, with the wider aim of identifying ways of addressing the discriminatory aspects of organizational life. To that end, this paper focuses on women's religious institutes[3] in the Roman Catholic Church as a sub-type of the whole genre of religious institutes (male and female, clerical - i.e., ordained - and lay).

FRAMING THE PROBLEM: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The methodological approach we take in this paper draws on (i) the co-authorship of an 'insider' (Catherine Ryan is a member of the Servite Sisters and an organizational consultant) and an 'outsider' (Albert J. Mills is a university-based researcher), and (ii) a combination of rules theory (Clegg, 1981; Mills, 1988; Helms-Mills and Mills, 2000) and feminist post-modernist organizational analysis (Ferguson, 1984; Acker, 1992; Burrell, 1992; Weedon, 1993).

The 'insider/outsider' perspective

Combining the thinking of a committed member of the Catholic Church with that of a nonbeliever allows us, in some measure, to get the sense of what is happening within the Catholic Church, while avoiding some of the pitfalls of unreflective sense-making (Weick, 1995). While this combination was to some extent fortuitous, we have incorporated it into our way of approaching the sense of the paper. At the very least, this has helped us to avoid the tendency whereby some 'insiders' either try to write for the "knowledgeable insider" (Bernstein, 1976:11) - leaving out of account broader issues of concern (e.g., the impact of organizational arrangements), or for a mainstream lay audience - leaving organizational specifics out of account (e.g., some of the minutia that contributes to the construction of the Church's identity). We also, hopefully, have avoided the parallel tendency for 'outsiders' to sideline religious groups, often dismissing them as disordered and at best irrelevant.

Organizational rules

Clegg (1981: 545) has proposed that much of the sense made of organizational realities arise out of issues of control, and that control is achieved through 'rules' that "formulate the structure underlying the apparent surface of organizational life." For Clegg, organizational life at a given point in time reflects "a configuration of informal and formal rules... as it deals with various legal requirements ("state rules"), adopts or adapts to extant management practices ("reproductive rules"), utilizes technology ("technical rules"), absorbs, reflects, or attempts to change the social attitudes that members bring to the organization ("extraorganizational rules"), develops human resources practices ("social regulative rules"), and attempts to control aspects of its external environment ("strategic rules") (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000). Mills and his colleagues have since adapted the rules approach as a heuristic for making sense of the gendering of organization (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000; Mills, 1988; Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991), viewing "the organisation as an interrelated network of social practices through which a wide multiplicity of activities are assembled to form institutionalised frameworks or patterns of collective action sustained over time and place by a matrix of rules" (Reed, 1992).

Feminist postmodern organizational analysis

Two problematics of the rules approach have been noted elsewhere. First, although "the notion of rules is useful for capturing the various expectations that guide and constrain behaviour, it does not explain how some of those expectations cohere into a way of thinking or behaving, or how coherence is contested and rule-bound behaviour changed" (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000: 65). Here we have turned to the work of Foucault, specifically feminist readings of Foucault, and his notion of discourse to understand how discursive practices give rise to a multitude of gendered experiences, some of which are translated into expectations or rules of action through the development of various discourses. As Sawici (Sawici, 1996) expresses it, "Discursive practices that construct gender are rule-- governed structures of intelligibility that both constrain and enable identity formations".

In our analysis, we particularly make use of Ferguson's (1984) strategic use of Foucault's notion of discourse and Acker's (1992 notion of the gendered substructure. Acker (1992:255) contends that "the more or less obvious manifestations of gender in organizational processes [...] are built upon, and in turn help to reproduce, a gendered substructure of organization:

The gendered substructure lies in the spatial and temporas arrangements of work, in the rules prescribing workplace behavior, and in the relations linking workplaces to living places. These practices and relations, encoded in arrangements and rules, are supported by assumptions that work is separate from the res of life and that it has first claim on the worker."

According to Acker (1992:252-3), the gendered substructure is reproduced through a series of interrelated processes that include (i) the "gender patterning of jobs", (ii) the "creation of symbols, images, and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify, and more rarely, oppose gender divisions", (iii) "interactions between [...] women and men, women and women, men and men, in the multiplicity of forms that enact dominance and subordination and create alliances and exclusions", and (iv) the "internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their understandings of the organization's gendered structure of work and opportunity and the demands for gender-- appropriate behaviors and attitudes." Despite Acer's reference to "jobs" and to "work," her description of the gendered substructure, as we shall show later, strongly captures the gendering of the Catholic Church.

Junctures

The second problematic is around the issue of understanding the influence of rules over time. Rules and subjectivities cannot be viewed as fixed, perfectly aligned, unchanging, or changing in an incremental or progressive way. To deal with some of these issues, we turn to the notion of juncture. A juncture is defined as a "concurrence of events which create a moment in time - a series of images, impressions, and experiences which act to give the appearance of a coherent whole and which influence how [an] organization is understood"(Mills, 1994). In other words, the history of a given organization should not be seen as a series of progressively changing events, but as a series of key time frames which shape how things were viewed at a given period of time.

The development of both women's and men's religious life is frequently presented as linear, a trajectory in which unitary state has evolved neatly into unitary state, each seen as a reaction to what preceded it. As a consequence, it has been possible to hazard the basic features of each institute simply by locating each one in its chronological place. When combined with the foundational vision of each group, this forms a satisfactory, if simplistic, means of describing the particular institute which, to 'insiders', would be more than adequate to assist in pigeonholing the group. However, Sheldrake (Sheldrake, 1991) contends that,

Figure 1:

"Traditional interpretations of the history of religious life illustrate the problems of an old-fashioned narrative structure which reinforces a sense that history is simple and monolithiu rather than complex and plural. Indeed, religious life is not so much a single spiritual iradition as a variety of movements and Christian life-styles which, because they interrelate, are generally viewed as a single phenomenon.... When the development of religious life is presented as a single line, what emerges tends to appear as the inevitable consequence of progress. 'What emerged' is read back into the process of development in such a way as to edit this in the light of the results."

In other words, the history of the Catholic Church in general, and Catholic women's religious orders in particular, should not be seen as a series of progressively changing events, but as a series of key time frames which shaped how things were viewed at a given period of time. to understand a particular time frame, we need to piece together the various factors -- rules, actors, discourses, and strategies - which shaped the worldview of organizational members at the time. In brief, while a particular set of factors may come together to create particular ways of viewing the world, a change in those factors can lead to a change in the subjectivity of those involved, creating different ways of viewing the world over time. To understand a particular period (or "juncture"), we need to understand not only the main features involved, but also the particular subjectivity of the time. Figure 2 depicts the culture of an organization as a series of junctures over time.

In organizing periods into junctures, we focus on notions of femininity and masculinity within the Catholic Church and the related development of religious orders, specifically women's religious orders (see figure 3.1).

DEFINING THE MUTUAL SPACE

Several issues bear on the development of women's religious orders and the unique identity (or identities) of nuns over time: religious dogma concerning the notion of, and the relationship between, God and Jesus Christ; asceticism, celibacy, and virginity (including the notion of the 'virgin' birth); monasticism and clericalism; and eschatology (i.e., doctrines about the end of the world). It is these factors, and the unique rules of organizing that have come to be associated with them, that have contributed to the constructing of the underlying "meaning" that Sheldrake (1993) refers to.

Our Father Who Art in Heaven

Figure 2:

Figure 3.1

We will not dwell on the fact that from the beginning, Christians have understood or made sense of God and of Jesus Christ through reference to maleness and to qualities associated with men. Clearly, the gendered images of God as "holy father" and Jesus as "son of God" have played, and continue to play, key roles in the development of a gendered sub-structure within the Catholic Church, permeating the gender patterning of roles, symbols, interactions between church

members, and the internal mental work of individuals.

What has changed over time has been the particular form of masculinity that believers have referenced to make sense of God and of Jesus. In his `analytic social psychological' analysis of the early beginnings of Christianity, Erich Fromm (1963) contends that between the first and fourth centuries the idea of God and of Jesus underwent radical changes. Christians' earlier view of God was ambivalent; God was seen as the "good father" who would help and deliver them" from the oppressions and torment of the world (Fromm, 1963), yet this notion contained "hostile impulses" against "this God ... who permitted them to suffer and be oppressed" (p.35). The "concept of Jesus held by the early community was that He was a man chosen by God and elevated by Him as a 'Messiah', and later as "Son of God" (Fromm, 1963:32). This "adoptionist"[4] story contains "the old myth of the rebellion of the son, an expression of hostile impulses toward the father-god": "[If] a man could become God, the latter was deprived of his privileged fatherly position of being unique and unreachable. The belief in the elevation of a man to God was thus the expression of unconscious wish for the removal of the Divine Father (Fromm, 1963: 35).

By the fourth century, the prominent Christian belief in God had lost its ambivalence, viewing God as "a good and loving father" (Fromm, 1963: 50) and Christ as "the son of God, born of the Father before all time, of one substance with the Father" (Fromm, 1963:47). In this later view, which culminated in the doctrine of Athanasius and was adopted by the Nicene Council, "the stress was no longer, as in the early Christian doctrine, on the overthrow of the father but on the self-annihilation of the son. The original aggression directed against the father was turned against the self (Fromm, 1963:49-50).

In order to understand "the psychological meaning of the first Christian's faith in Christ" (Fromm, 1963:25) argues that, "it is necessary for us to visualize what kind of people supported early Christianity" "They were the masses of the uneducated poor, the proletariat of Jerusalem, and the peasants in the country who, because of the increasing political and economic oppression and because of social restriction and contempt, increasingly felt the urge to change existing conditions."

For Fromm (1963), these masses saw in Christianity a hope for the future, viz. the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. It was a vision in which the poor would inherit the earth and the rich and powerful would be punished for their sins. Fromm (1963:36) argues that the notion of Jesus as a man who became a god served the psychological purpose of suggesting that the ordinary, oppressed individual could become a god: "If they thought of this crucified one as elevated to God, this meant that in their unconsciousness, this crucified god was themselves."

Around the middle of the second century, the followers of Christianity were increasingly drawn from the middle and higher classes of the Roman Empire, and under Constantine it became a state religion. By now it had become "the religion of the larger circles of the ruling class in the Roman Empire," which generated new interpretations of the nature of God and Jesus (Fromm, 1963:40).

After three centuries, belief in the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God had dwindled, and within the Christian religion now dominated by those who wanted to preserve the status quo, new images of God and Jesus were predominant:

"Christians no longer looked to the future or to history, but, rather, they looked backwards. The decisive event had already taken place. The appearance of Jesus had already represented the miracle. The real, historical world no longer needed to change; outwardly everything could remain as it was - state, society, law, economy - for salvation had become as inward, spiritual, unhistorical, individual matter guaranteed by faith in Jesus. The hope for real, historical

deliverance was rplacea by faith in the already complete spiritual deliverence" (Fromm, 1963:44-5).

These doctrinal changes were accompanied by numerous organizational changes. While in the first century there was not a clearly defined external authority in the Christian communities, the second century saw the gradual development "of an ecclesiastical union with authoritative leaders" and "[...] the establishment of a systematic doctrine of faith by which the individual Christian had to submit"(Fromm, 1963:46). The notion that God alone could forgive sins gave way to the belief that this function was served on earth by the Church, or more specifically, by its priests. "Christianity, which had been the religion of a community of equal brothers[5], without hierarchy or bureaucracy, became "the Church", the reflected image of the absolute monarchy of the Roman Empire (Fromm, 1963: 46).

Drawing on Fromm's (1963) analysis, we can see the makings of two distinct junctures: (1.) An era in which Christian beliefs were propagated by and within communities of more-or-less equal peoples, marked by lack of formal organization and systematic dogma (from the first century to the middle of the second century), and (2.) An era characterized by the organization of "the Church" into a laity and a priesthood, with an official dogma (from the end of the second century to the fourth century) (see figure 3.2). These distinct changes, in combination with a number of other factors, were to have a profound influence on notions of womanhood and manhood.

Figure 3.2

Asceticism, celibacy, and virginity

"No human institution is older than [the Catholic] sisterhood." (McNamara, 1996). Whilst the components of the lifestyle of the religious comprise several distinct strands, their roots can be traced to the wandering groups of disciples, where men and women lived together in syneisactic groups[6], that is, as 'brothers' and 'sisters', which characterized the first followers of Christ. From the activities of this first generation of Christians came the development of the ideal of asceticism, in part as a rejection of existing social values (e.g., the notion of the married household and its emphasis on worldliness and material worth), in part as an example of religious commitment, and in part as preparation for the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God (Noble, 1993). By dissolving the household and replacing it with a community of celibates, devotees hoped to effect a spiritual and social revolution (Noble, 1993:12).

According to Noble (1993: 12), by "renouncing their sexual iv,es, the Christian celibates renounced as well their sexual identities." This element, in combination with other ideas, encouraged the development of "an androgynous ascetic ideal" (Noble, 1993:13). This held a powerful attraction for women by providing them, on the one hand, with legitimacy to free themselves from family commitments (either momentarily or in the future), and, on the other hand, with an image of "equality in the image of God" (Noble, 1993: 12).

In classical times, for a woman to opt for virginity was a stark repudiation by the individual of the role normally allotted to her by society[7]: either that of wife, mother, or courtesan; it left her free to participate on an equal footing with men in a common search for perfection. Otherwise, women had to wait until widowhood to be able to develop any form of an independent life. In some cases, legislation even limited the amount of time a widow could spend before she was obliged to remarry. Public religion was a mainly male preserve, and women increasingly sought ways of both `having a career' and a public, legitimized, expression of their religious beliefs.

Thus, in the early Christian period, the only way a woman could participate in preaching, public prayer, and religion was for her to leave home and family and join the vagabond community of equals, which was the early Christian church. According to McNamara (1996:12), this "ideal of syneisactism ... was the most deeply radical social concept that Christianity produced." It is important to remember that in the early New Testament, it was believed that the end of the world was nigh (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:26), and that after death it would not matter to whom one had been married in one's bodily life (cf. Mark 12: 19-- 25). Fiorenza (Fiorenza, 1979) contends that early Christianity was "an egalitarian, countercultural, multifaceted movement" membership which "was not defined by gender roles, but by faith commitment to the Christian community. Women, in this egalitarian movement, were not marginal figures, but exercised responsible leadership."

Given the polarization between the meta-rules implied in the societal view of women and those of the paradigm shift (in terms of gender, class and economic relations) demonstrated in the lives of these first Christians, it is not surprising that women saw these wandering communities as a way to self-- determination outside marriage, and so flocked to join them. Society at large, on the other hand, was very nervous about the phenomenon it observed, which seemed to undermine its foundational traditions. Christianity was clearly, in its early days, subversive. Society's suspicion, combined With the recognition that the world was not about to end after all, led to a decline in syneisactic groups, though not necessarily in the numbers of individuals who practiced the virtues for which the groups had been known.

In relationship to this early era, there is some debate as to how the notion of womanhood was understood, at least in regard to the syneisactic groups. To some extent, there was a notion that celibate women were viewed as 'spiritual males.' Yet, as Clark (1986: quoted in Noble, 1993) contends, in practice, sexual identity had lost its significance within such groups and that the men and women involved established close spiritual companionships -- seeing themselves as an asexual "third race".

In the first Christian era (or juncture), asceticism - with its corollaries of celibacy (remaining unmarried) and virginity (or sexual abstinence) - was centered within a discourse which allowed women a large degree of autonomy and equality. Indeed, some scholars (McNamara, 1983) contend that the celibate ideal may have originated with women concerned "to create a new social space beyond the confines of the family and marriage" (Noble, 1993:13). This may, in part, explain why, once the syneisactic groups began to disappear, women continued to make life choices which placed both chastity, and virginity, centre-stage. Virginity, because it was seen to enable a woman to adopt manly characteristics[8], was, therefore, seen by many women as a more perfect state for which to opt. And so a more evident double-stranded choice for women is seen: in addition to the well-established practice for widows to make a choice for singleness, some women devoted themselves to life-long virginity. Virgins and widows tended to live in their own homes, singly or with their families. The characteristics of their lifestyles differed from person to person and place to place, their lives being neither organized nor communal. There was a well-- established tradition for widows either to devote themselves to prayer and preaching or to 'good works'. Evidence also seems to indicate that widows having opted for this kind of life were supported by the Church.

Eventually, in some places it became common for virgins and widows to live in groups, thus affording them better security than living singly. Also, better-off virgins and widows may have shared their homes with those who were less materially independent. Together, these resulted in the beginnings of a settled, communal lifestyle (juncture 2, see figures 3.1 and 3.2).

Such groups were ad hoc and had no formal structures beyond those imparted by the particular vision of the founder or founding members. Perhaps, had they not later had to conform to certain structural and behavioural requirements of the institutional church (see in particular junctures 4 and 5, figure 3.2), these groups would have retained their organic, informal quality (Brown, 1988)

Public proclamation or recognition of one's choice for chastity or virginity was not initially formalized by vow. However, by the fourth century groups were being consecrated annually in such places as Italy, Constantinople, and Alexandria and elsewhere in North Africa. Still, they lived with their parents, in their own homes, or now for the first time in groups with clergy around a church. This formal dedication locates the women for the first time within the authority structure of the church as, consecrated by the local bishop, they were now placed formally under his care. This is commensurate with the patriarchalisation of church structures with the disappearance of the syneisactic and the demarcation of gender boundaries in ecclesial structures (see juncture 2, figure 3.2).

Group living brought the virgins and widows more into the public arena, and their lives received more scrutiny junctures 2 to 5). A result of this was the concern of Church authorities to gain some sense of control over what was, up until that time, a largely informal and self-regulating lifestyle. It is around this time that the feature of enclosure[9] was formalized and made a compulsory element of the structure of such groups. As early 'scientific' attempts to understand sexuality and gender began to infiltrate society and these ideas were widely adopted (Brown 1988), the need for a patriarchal church to enforce enclosure for women increased, so after the seventh century legislation "increased the authority of bishops, monasticised many houses and resulted in gender-specific canons on enclosure which created a double standard" (Sheldrake 1991 p.119). In the ninth century, "the Regula monachorum talked in very ascetical terms of women's seclusion. The vanity of the world (a female problem?) was contrasted with nuns who were dead and buried in Christ and with convents which were described as 'tombs'." (Ibid.)

Similarly, as the growth of virginis sacrae testifies, the personal, individual nature of vowing virginity became a characteristic validated by the institutional church, and was eventually accompanied by the other vows of poverty (owning nothing in one's own right) and obedience (taking the authority for one's actions from one's relationship with God). It is notable right from the beginning that vows made within religious institutes had a relational orientation. They demonstrated the intention to live in right relation with people, things, and God. Even today, these form the tripartite commitment of each religious woman or man, vows made within the institution and validated by it, rather than simply a private covenant between an independent individual and their God.

As individuals sought to formalize their commitment, and simultaneously controls were exerted by Church authorities (such as the local Bishop's authorization of the vows of the individual, and the imposition of enclosure), we see perhaps a convergence. At least in part, the same practice (i.e. the taking of public vows) was used to concretize both the individual's life orientation and authenticate the group within which the individual hoped that this would take place. For the individual who wished to situate her life within an established community, this firmly embedded that personal commitment within a growing institutionalization.

Bearing in mind the ease of travel and communications in the fourth and fifth centuries, any proliferation of groups was obviously the result of spontaneous, locally based inspiration which thus probably had wide variation in customs, activities, and structures. Church activity towards controlling and formalizing the groups meant that progressively, in spite of their differences, they were classed as one: a single 'type' springing from a variety of sources.

The principles governing the structural features of religious institutes are those relating to Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1995). Reading this section reveals that much is taken for granted: the Code spells out rights and responsibilities for the setting up, maintenance, and government of religious institutes of both men and women. Much of the information and structures to which the legislation refers is both cumulative and tacit, and springs directly from the models of religious institute illustrated by the earliest codified forms of religious life, such as the Benedictines (see juncture 3).

The structure of religious institutes is hierarchical and pyramidal. The terminology used is military, and thus implicit is the stress on authority; with the highest office termed "Superior General", followed by "Provincial Superior", "Regional Superior" and "Local Superior", each denoting successively smaller territorial areas (see junctures 2 and 4). This results in linear authority structures and frequently in the abdication of responsibility, despite the principle of subsidiary (cf. the competent authority detailed in Canon Law to denote decisions proper to the individual level of the organisation).

Between the second and fourth centuries, the notion of asceticism was dislodged from its location within a discourse of androgyny and became, instead, associated with masculinity and fear of women. This new discourse has its roots in the development of the organization of Catholicism, in particular the rise of monasticism and the notion of clerical asceticism (juncture 2, figure 3.2).

Over time, asceticism, particularly clerical asceticism, was at the heart of several new discourses which viewed women more (juncture 3) or much less (junctures 4 and 5) favourably. Within these new discourses, nations of celibacy and of virginity were viewed in a different light. Celibacy, for instance, contributed in some eras (in particular juncture 3) to a view of women as more-or-less equal, with women judged against masculinity as 'virile' and 'manly'[10]. In other eras, the focus shifted from female to male (clerical) celibacy and contributed to a view of women as sexually dangerous (juncture 4), a view which heightened as the Church, desirous of encouraging the development of celibacy, defiled notions of marriage and of womanhood to gain monastic converts and a celibate priesthood (juncture 5). In more recent times, celibacy has been seen as"the most powerful boundary of a culture of separation" (Sheldrake, 1993:30) (see junctures 6 and 7), or as Na disciplinary rule" (Frank, 1997) (see juncture 7), or as a means of channeling energies away from sexuality into the religious life (Bernstein, 1976), (see juncture 6).

Virginity has appeared in many guises over time - either focused on the sexual abstinence of the celibate, or through reference to `the virgin birth' and the role of the `Virgin Mary' in the Church. In earlier times, the focus was more on the sexual abstinence of male and female celibates, and varied from preparation for the coming `Kingdom of God' (juncture 1) to the achievement of an asexual state of perfection (junctures 2 & 3). In later times, a concern with male abstinence conjured up misogynous images of the impure or dangerous nature of women (junctures 4 and 5). Female virginity was, over time, referenced as a state of purity or perfection (junctures 1 and 3) or as a paternalistic sign of care (e.g., use of the Virgin Mother as an ironic symbol of motherly care and bodily perfection) and dedication; in this latter regard, nuns came to be seen as `brides of Christ' (juncture 2). According to Fromm (1963:52), in the early centuries of Christianity the "divine figures of the Great Mothers served to consolidate the hold of the emerging 'church' on its followers, contributing to a developing metaphor of the Church "as the Great Mother through whom alone man can achieve security and blessing." Within the emerging church at this time, the notion of virginity as an aesthetic of the pure, untouched human body came to the fore, serving the purpose of giving the Church an identity (Noble, 1993:48). Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, for example, turned the ascetic movement to the advantage of the church, drawing upon notions of virginity and the perpetual virginity of Mary (Noble, 1993: 62). This coincided with notions of asceticism in which women and men could commune as more-or-less equals (juncture 1, also juncture 3). In a later era (juncture 2), virginity or continence served the rise and victory of an elite within the Church, with the emphasis shifting to male continence and clerical asceticism.

In the Middle Ages (see juncture 5), the Church's notion of virginity was viewed within a misogynous framework of womanhood as evil. During the twelfth century, expulsion of women from all the mixed settlements of the Premonstratensians, an abbot was to write, "We and our whole community of canons, [...] recognizing that the wickedness of women is greater than all the other wickedness of the world, and that there is no anger like that of women, and that the poison of asps and dragons is more curable and less dangerous to men than the familiarity of women, have, unanimously decreed for the safety of our souls, no less than for that of our bodies, that we

will on no account receive any more sisters to the increase of our perdition, but will avoid them like poisonous animals." (Gies & Gies, 1978).

The Organization of the Catholic Church

The organizational development of the Catholic church was influenced by several factors, each of which had a range of implications for women and women's religious orders. The loosely organized syneisactic groups, coupled with a particular notion of asceticism, were more-or-- less favourable to women, facilitating the opportunity for celibate women to engage in religious life and its teachings (juncture 1). But it was not only celibate women who played a role in religious life - - the married household also fostered a notable female presence. The Church and household were essentially one and the same, "and women influential in the household were influential in the church" (Noble, 1993:8).

In the struggle to develop a formal organization, "pressures mounted for the creation of an ascetic priesthood, in part to insulate it from undue lay influence" (Noble, 1993:10). Thus celibacy, male celibacy in particular, was used to create an elite within Christianity, i.e., those who, by their actions, had demonstrated their purity and commitment (juncture 2). Nonetheless, within this early context, women continued to play an influential, but increasingly subordinate, role within the emerging church as males began to monopolize clerical positions (Noble, 1993: 8). Now that the church as an institution was separate from the household, it was men who played the dominant role in the church hierarchy, leaving women more limited spheres of influence through marriage to a cleric or through commitment to celibacy.

While one emphasis on celibacy contributed to the creation of a male clerical hierarchy (juncture 2), a different emphasis was used to build the church and its identity, an emphasis which contributed to a renewed 'androgynous spirit' (juncture 3). By the turn of the fourth century; sexual renunciation was widely acclaimed within the church and encouraged new generations of male and female celibates, who, despite the male dominance of the new church, were drawn together in spiritual companionship. A new era was created when Constantine revoked the Augustan laws against celibacy and Christianity was legalized by the Edict of Milan. This encouraged new ascetics from the ranks of upper class Christian women who were widows or young virgins. These women formed intense friendships with one another and coagulated into small groups for support and study. They were free to seek the protection and spiritual guidance from men of any kind (Noble, 1993: 20-21). In another context, the development of clerical asceticism through the monastic movement was taking a different turn and was to lead to a struggle, in the fourth century, against clerical marriage and the involvement of women in the church (juncture 2). At this time, clergy were free to marry, and it is generally agreed that the majority did, in fact, do so (Anderson & Zinsser, 1988; Noble, 1993; Ranke-Heinemann, 1990). This led to the contradictory situation whereby "the fathers of the church, while increasingly extolling virginity as the epitome of Christian virtue in the wake of the monastic movement, nevertheless avoided denying the sanctity of marriage" (Noble, 1993:7). This situation held for another seven hundred years before-the church, under monastic influence, resorted to biblical authority for the imposition of a rule of celibacy.

The early era of monastic development (juncture 3) saw a view of women as 'failed men' who could, through the act of celibacy, achieve a form of equality. The development of religious communities distinguished through celibacy, coupled with a particular view of celibate women as more-or-less equal to men, encouraged (or at least did not discourage) the development of the advent of the 'double monastery.' Men and women lived in adjoining or neighboring houses, following the same rule, participating together in common services, and obeying the same (male or female) leaders (Noble, 1993: 25-26). In many cases, these monasteries were founded by women who, more often than not, became the abbess. The influence of a number of powerful abbesses over these institutional combinations of men and women have generated speculation of

the gendered character of the double monastery. Gies and Gies (1978:66), for example, state that, "the superior was invariably a woman, leading to modem speculation that the house was essentially a nunnery, and that the male element was present to perform male services - manual labor, the celebration of mass, and hearing confessions." Noble (1993:26), on the other hand, argues that, while "the existence of double monasteries reflected the need of female monastics for the services of male priests, to celebrate the Mass, and for male protection in troubled times .... they also reflected the sustained belief in the androgynous ideal which surfaced again and again in the wake of monastic revivals."

Ironically, it was the development of monasticism that, over time, was to lead to the stripping of female power and the ending of clerical marriage. In a later period (juncture 5), it was what Noble (1993) calls the "monasticization of the church" that decisively put an end to clerical marriage within the Catholic Church. It was in this era of Gregorian Reforms that celibacy was raised to a new height within the church, and only celibate priests were accepted as the true spirit of the church. It was an era in which the dominance of male clericalism, shaped through a period of militarization and military culture of masculinity (Noble, 1993) (see juncture 4), characterized women as evil and dangerous and led to the degradation of women and a downgrading of their influence within the church. Within this era, male clerics exercised powerful control over nunneries, with nuns being forced to remain within the confines of the convent, i.e., enforced claustration. Double monasteries were discouraged and convents lost their importance as educational centres.

On the one hand, the Church insisted that women's establishments could not exist except as chapters of male orders, but on the other hand, many male orders, such as the Cluniacs and the Cistercians, feared the presence and, thus, the acceptance of women (Gies and Gies, 1978:87). Even the newer thirteenth "mendicant" orders founded by Saint Dominic and Saint Francis were slow to incorporate women's communities. Saint Francis rejected acceptance of the Poor Clares as Franciscan "sisters" saying that, "God has taken away our wives, and now the devil gives us sisters". (Gies and Gies, 1978: 88). Saint Thomas Aquinas, among others, declared that women were inferior to men.

Already by the twelfth century, the Roman Catholic Church had developed into what Noble (1993) convincingly calls 'a world without women,' an organization and an ideology centred on a misogynous masculine culture. Over the next seven centuries, despite important challenges (e.g., the Protestant Reformation), the Catholic Church 'dominated the history of modem civilization.'

The ideology of the now male celibate dominated church was carried further into the consciousness of men of power and learning through the church's establishment of centres of learning, from the monastic centres of learning in the period of the Dark Ages through to the high-medieval period, through the cathedral schools of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, to the establishment of the Western universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These centres of learning were dominated by celibates until the mid-nineteenth century, and admitted only male students. The development of 'scientific knowledge' was, according to Noble (1993), intertwined with the character and organization of the centres of learning and their intimate connection to the Catholic Church.

Despite the development of the Church, the Army, the Professorate, and Medicine as male dominated professions, the growing industrialization (and consequent organization) of society opened spaces for women which drew on a discourse which associated womanhood with caring and ministering to the needs of the helpless. Female religious orders were in some ways ideally placed to reach out to the community as nurses and proto-social workers in a climate where other women were negatively labeled if they attempted similar work. In seventeenth century France, for example, the Vincent de Paul's Daughters of Charity took up nursing where no 'decent' woman would risk such a thing, nurses at that time having a reputation for being both dirty and drunk

(Bernstein, 1976: 229). This type of community work also assisted some female orders in convincing the church to allow them to break the rule of strict enclosure. In numerous ways, the sisterhood became a multifaceted profession, a vocation in itself, where women could engage in various forms of community work and intellectual and contemplative activities that were generally denied them outside of the religious communities.

As the centuries wore on, the power of the Catholic Church waned as that of civil society gained in importance. While the role of women in society gradually changed, convents offered less to those who sought a more active part in social affairs. As the other professions grew in number and importance, the demand of celibacy for the vocation of (Catholic) priesthood has seemed to many a severe requirement. From the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic Church has steadily faced a decline in its number of priests, monks, and nuns, and in 1962 the Second Vatican Council (or Vatican II) attempted, in part, to address some of its problems through modernization. In the words of Pope John, "We are going to shake off the dust that has collected on the throne of St. Peter since the time of Constantine and let in some fresh air" (quoted in Bernstein, 1976:191). As part of the process, religious orders were asked to return to the pioneering spirit of their founders, to reexamine and "remodel their way of life to fit more usefully into the world" (Bernstein, 1976:192).

Following Vatican II, many religious orders have examined what they do and this had led, in some cases, to changes; in some cases, to a questioning of fundamental ways of doing things; in some ways, to a challenging of male authority within the church[11]; and in many cases, a profound crisis of meaning as nuns attempt to find their way in a church dominated by men and by a culture of masculinity (juncture 7). For female religious orders, it is not always easy to identify the pioneering spirit of their order. The role of women in the church has had a checkered history, and for some it is not easy to unravel the pioneering intent of the founders from the strictures placed on her by the male dominant church. Individuals and groups who live the religious life have always been somewhat at odds with society. They have also been at odds with the church, which gave rise to them. These occupants of the liminal space between church and society, critique both, yet cannot survive without either[12]. Frequently, the reading of this is that such groups have set themselves up in indignant, self-righteousness, and moral certitude, when perhaps they are merely, by living according to a particular set of values, critiquing the wider institutions with which they relate. With a dynamic trajectory such as this, and a developmental history spanning the history of Christianity (with forerunners in ancient Hinduism (O' Murchu 1989), there is a healthy peppering of attempts to control, and thereby emasculate, religious institutes. The cumulative effect of this has been progressively to render modem institutes a pale shadow of what their founders might have intended. In addition, such attempts have left institutes a legacy of particular difficulties in their ongoing attempts to retain, or regain, the liminal space.

Vatican II's encouragement of a rediscovery of the original pioneering spirit is proving problematic on at least two counts: (i) the original foundation is, in many cases, linked to out-moded discourses of womanhood and manhood, an asceticism that has a different meaning in the modern world; and (ii) contradictory messages (and interpretations of those messages) have come out of Vatican 11. For example, Cardinal Antoniutti, speaking to the major superiors of women's orders in 1968, stated that "Vatican II did not authorize experiments, which would obscure the meaning of religious life, create confusion or provoke scandal. Changes affecting the nature of the institute were forbidden and no fundamental changes were to be made in dress" (Bernstein, 1976:165-6). Ranke-Heinemann (1988:196) contends that the Second Vatican Council, with its continued prohibition on birth control and its emphasis of sexual intercourse only for purposes of procreation, "has been wrongly described as a step forward in sexual morality." As for celibacy, the 1990 Roman Synod reaffirmed clerical celibacy throughout the church, stating that "it shone out" with new clarity (Sheldrake, 1993:30).

RESHAPING THE LIMINAL SPACE: LESSONS FOR NUNS AND OTHER STUDENTS OF

ORGANIZATION

As we study the development of the Roman Catholic Church over time, several things are apparent. First, the development of the Catholic Church has shaped our modernist nations of management and organization. The Catholic Church shaped the notion of the exclusive rights of an elite body to exercise power over other organizational members. It contributed to the idea of the professional and professionalism, (i.e., a body of persons deemed different and special through reference to a particular set of characteristics (e.g., celibacy, continence). The discursive practices of the Catholic Church also contributed to the notion of organizational space, organization as a spatial concept, organization as the exercise of exclusive rights over defined matters, and of the monopolization of certain activities by organizations - i.e., the notion of corporate right.

Second, in many ways these activities have been shaped in deeply gendered ways that have had a profound influence on the development of the phenomenon of the organization over time. Thus, management and the professional have, for the most part, been associated with men and masculinity. Professionalism (or the act of being 'professional') has, through the Catholic Church, been associated with abstinence and asexual behaviour, whether it be linked to the androgynous notion of 'the third race' (juncture 1), the male-referenced (asexual) 'manliness of the second juncture, or the misogynous masculinity of the great periods of monastic development (junctures 4 and 5). In recent times, the exercise of professional authority predisposes the existence of (muted) masculine qualities. The separation of the institution of the church from the church households created a wedge that predated the public/domestic divide of later years (Rosaldo, 1974). More specifically, the issue of enclosure was transformed from a metaphorical to a literal space; from a spiritual space where celibate women could commune in peace to a materially bound place where women were confined. We cannot help but wonder if, in the notion of forced enclosure, do we find the genesis of the gendered workplace? Finally, there is at the heart of the notion of exclusive domain more than a suggestion of territoriality and outmoded masculine notions of dominance.

Third, the fate of women (and of men) within organizations is neither linear nor progressive, nor is it guaranteed. Women have played powerful, influential, and oftentimes equal roles within the Catholic Church over time junctures 1, 2, and 3). This tells us that there is nothing fixed or unchangeable about existing power structures; it also tells us that what has been deemed to be gained (e.g., employment equity) needs to be protected through constant vigilance.

What does any of this tell us about the role of women in the Catholic Church? Primarily, we would point to the existence of a link between discourse and organizational practice. It can be argued that certain discourses of the nature of man, of woman, and of religious commitment serve to support certain forms of organizational practices. We cannot be sure, however, the extent to which one is cause and one effect, but we would suggest that the institutionalization of certain organizational practices (e.g., as in the development of monastic life over time) can play a determinant role in the development of influential discourses within organizations. This leads us to believe that (a) it is important for women religious to develop their own discourses) of self and identity (cf. Ferguson, 1984), but that (b) this cannot be done at the neglect of organization. Women in religious orders need to find ways to challenge and change the organizational arrangements of the Catholic Church while developing a powerful discourse to support the new arrangements. This will not be easy, as the Beguine movement of the 14th century and the sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Community of the 20th century found to their cost. Nor will it be easy to build a discourse that easily discounts those elements that have for so long been defining characteristics of the religious life, namely celibacy, sexual abstinence, and sanctified space. Understandings of those characteristics have become unaligned within many of today's discourses, and many religious are struggling to find ways to abandon them while retaining a definable religious identity, while others are finding ways to make different sense of them (Weick

1995, retaining the notion of celibacy, continence, and sanctified space, but from different rationales. Perhaps, in the end, the future of Catholic women's religious organization will ultimately depend on a redefined liminal space.

[Footnote]
NOTES

and all women to have children. (McNamara 1996:11)

[Footnote]
[8] Discussions ranged around the notion of gender as fluid, possibly following the Aristotelian continuum which defined women as failed men, making women imperfect as a result of menstruation and childrearing (Brown, 1988; McNamara, 1996). The notion of woman as "failed man" became more prominent within the Church over time.

[9] Enclosure was, and is still, in monasteries of monks and nuns, a juridically established area of a religious house, which was for the sole use of the members ofthe community, into which no non-member could come. It is a classic example of how a choice made to protect a value, that of protecting space for individual and group, became subverted into a means of social control, keeping members of the opposite sex out (Sheldrake 1991: 119).

[Footnote]
[10] This viewpoint focused on female celibacy as an escape from her worldly (or sexual) bonds. it allowed women to gain status and authority within the church, and to engage in intellectual life.

(II] The 1967 establishment of the National Assembly of Women Religious, and the 1969 establishment of the National Coalition of American Nuns (to prevent oppression of women in religion) are visible signs of this challenge. Break-aways from the Church, such as the Immaculate Heart of Mary Community in the US are other signs of challenge (see Bernstein, 1976)

[Footnote]
[12] Winnicott's (Winnicott, 1971) notion of "potential space" provides valuable insights into the creation of psychic meanings as people are confronted with the realm of objective reality. Although beyond the scope ofthis paper, further exploration ofthe psychodynamics of potential space can help to explain how nuns confront the artifacts and discourse of their religious world as an immediate but contested territory between the inner and external world. For a more elaborated discussion of Winnicott's potential contribution to organization studies see Carr (Carr, in press).

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