Negotiated/Consecrated: A Critique of the Representation of Women Religious in History

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In feminist theory, the concept of negotiation is seen as a phenomenon concurrent with domination in androcentric societies. However, women in-volved in the process are not passive sufferers even when they participate in the setting up and maintaining these gender relations. As active agents, however, they account for altering systems and shifting boundaries. This paper will examine briefly how diverse communities of women religious transformed their cloisters through negotiation into spaces of autonomy.

For much of the modern age and well up to the end of the eighties, most practitioners of history viewed the past using a particular set of lenses. Influenced highly by Leopold von Ranke, they adhered to the dictum that their task was simply to write about the past as *wie es eigentlich gewesen war*: how it actually was.[1] Such was the situation in the community even when various "post-" movements such as post-feminism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and post-colonialism have broken ground in the academe. Peter Novick captured the *zeitgeist:*

> At the very center of the professional historical venture is the ideal of "objectivity." It was the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d'être*…. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and

1. Leopold von Ranke, *Fürsten und Völker : Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen* (Wiesbaden: Vollmer, 1957), 4.

> independent of interpretation… Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are "found", not "made"…. The objective historian's role is that of a neutral or disinterested judge.[2]

Thus, the belief that the past could be reconstructed empirically through an assiduous reading of documents remained the central tenet.

Practitioners of history agree that the craft was "shaken right down to its scientific and cultural roots" throughout the nineties.[3] What catalyzed this was the irruption in their consciousness of the linguistic turn – essentially, implying that human beings do not use language to communicate their thought but rather, what they think is determined by language. Thus a new understanding of the craft developed: that "history taken as a whole contains no immanent unity or coherence; that every conception of history is a construct, constituted through language; that human beings as subjects have no integrated personality free of contradictions and ambivalences."[4] The jolt was bound to be powerful as

> the subject matter of history – that is events and behavior – and the data – that is contemporary texts – and the problem – that is explanation of change over time – have all been brought seriously into question, thus throwing the profession… into a crisis of self-confidence about what it is doing and how it is doing it.[5]

Many historians at that time feared that the crisis introduced by late modernity would emasculate historiography to "just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a word of foundationless, positioned expressions."[6]

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2. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-2.

3. Appleby, Joyce, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 1.

4. Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 132.

5. Lawrence Stone, "History and Post-Modernism," *Past and Present*, 131 (May 1991): 217.

6. Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 6.

On hindsight though, we should not be vitiated by such dread. While it is true that late modernity caused us to move beyond history's meta-narrative, i.e., "a Great Past that can be recounted in a single best narrative, the Great Story"[7] - it did not cause the collapse of the craft itself. Late modernity "encouraged historians to look more closely at documents, to take their surface patina more seriously, and to think about texts and narratives in new ways."[8] Given that individuals doing history now should forego the Rankean illusion of objective knowledge, Georg Iggers posits that the most that they could do is to achieve plausibility. He cautions, however, that

> …plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves rational strategies of determining what in fact is plausible. It assumes that the historical account relates to a historical reality, no matter how complex and indirect the process is by which the historian approximates this reality.[9]

I became conscious of the need to change my own historiographical strategy after re-reading my previous works and unpublished notes on women religious in pre-19th century Manila. These lines were scribbled on a rough draft I made in 2001:

> Catholic women religious only effectively impinged upon wider Philippine society during the last 150 years. Until the 1850s, the six communities of women religious that operated within *Filipinas* had limited influence on the socio-economic structures of the colony. This is because their outreach to the people was so geographically limited. Thus, only the inhabitants of Intramuros and its suburbs were influenced by their existence. Even this assertion should be curtailed given that these women led cloistered or semi-cloistered lives that either prevented or limited any direct involvement with the lives of the colonial populace. The coming of the Daughters of Charity in 1862 signaled the

7. James T. Kloppenberg, "Review of 'Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse.'" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, 1(1998): 135.

8. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 214.

9. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century,* 145.

> beginnings of a shift in the colonial model of religious life for women. Unlike the six earlier communities, the Daughters of Charity were non-cloistered, free from episcopal control, and diversified in their ministries by virtue of their founding character. For these reasons, these women religious, were able to engage in various forms of charitable and teaching ministries outside the archdiocese of Manila with fewer encumbrances and thus affect the lives of a greater number of people in the colony.

What this shows was my inclination to base my valorization of women on their participation and contribution to the Spanish Catholic colonial project. This was bound to happen since the majority of materials I used to relate their story were mediated by men. I gave little attention to either how pre-nineteenth century *monjas* and *beatas* as actors living within an uncontested androcentric locus established a sense of autonomy away from it or the strategies they employed to set the parameters of their relationships with men in power. Perhaps unconsciously, I was advocating that the validity of their presence in narratives of the past hinged on their subscription to the religious-colonial project and not on their distancing from and negotiating with it.

The framework around which I had operated was far removed from how women historians and sociologists have come to view monastic life as a space that allowed woman to be woman. Rosalind Miles articulates this opinion:

> Within a convent, however, a woman could preserve both her soul and her body, and it is a striking illustration of women's power to convert a disability into a source of strength that so many of them used their conventual retreat as a platform from which they could, in Mary Ritter Beard's words, "spring into freedom." The origin and base of the convent life may have been the harsh patriarchal disgust with women's bodies which dictated that they had best be covered, denied, shut away…. But as a logical consequence, the women who rose above their filthy bodies with the transcendent act of "virgin sacrifice" won high esteem from contemporary males who naturally assumed that forswearing heterosexual activity was the greatest sacrifice in the world. By firmly demonstrating that sex was not on their agenda, women religious sloughed off

> the odium attaching to sexually active women, and gained an almost mystical power from their inviolate status….[10]

Instead of sapping their vitality, what castimony wrought on these women was "a sanctioned independence" which conferred on them "a license to move in the public arena, to take charge, to initiate change."[11] On further reflection, I realized that I was still a captive of the notion that virginity, asceticism, and claustration caused suffering on women, the passive victims of patriarchal suppression.[12] I had to remind myself of an important dictum concerning the writing of women's history: "Focusing on the concept of women as victim obscures the true history of women."[13]

Much of western feminist history in the nineties focused on the relation of women to men in given historical and social contexts. Without eschewing the use of written sources, women historians applied various methods that revealed the neglected woman actor in documents at their disposal. The sub-discipline of social history has undoubtedly flourished under the influence of these permutations in its areas of inquiry and expanded the horizons for our understanding of woman. Writing women's history, then, does not stop with making them visible in history: "Rather than merely add a gendered subject, the construction of subjectivity itself should become a central point of inquiry."[14] Post-empirical research, therefore, calls for a change in the (re)presentation of women in the past. Individuals doing history should change how they view and present them from passive victims of patriarchies and their self-perpetuating sufferers to self-defining actors able to live in ambivalences and contradictions. A woman-centered view of the

10. Rosalind Miles, *The Women's History of the World* (Topsfield: Salem House Publishers, 1989), 104-05.

11. Ibid., 105.

12. Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 6-7.

13. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), xxii.

14. Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York and London: Guilford, 1994), 9.

past should endeavor "to correct both the invisibility and the distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position."[15]

Several feminist historians and social scientists have begun to re-present woman in present and past through feminist gender theory. This approach focuses on how gender is not possessed but done.[16] These theorists stress the need to understand gender as socially constructed differences within a social context, distinct from differences based on reproductive biology, which is more properly labeled as *sex*:

> When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who "do" gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.[17]

When talking about gender relations, the question of domination unavoidably arises. Previous approaches to past and present examples of male domination made it appear that women passively accepted/accepts their subordination and thus, were/are responsible for their own victimization. Feminist theory has contributed much to the deconstruction of this position by highlighting that women, apart from not being the cause of their own oppression, are also not

15. Patti Lather, "Feminist Perspectives on Empowering Research Methodologies," *Women's Studies International Forum* (1998): 571.

16. Johanna Foster, "An Invitation to Dialogue: Clarifying the Position of Feminist Gender Theory in Relation to Sexual Difference Theory," *Gender and Society* 13, no. 4 (1999): 444.

17. Candace West and Don Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 126.

passive in this gender economics. They posit that more than one process happens in this dynamics – women concurrently respond to domination with negotiation:

> Although our conception of negotiation is derived in part from exchange theory, it also departs from an exchange model in two fundamental ways. First, unlike exchange theorists, we maintain that there are two processes, negotiation and domination, which occur simultaneously. The co-existence of negotiation and domination thus obviates or resolves one of the problems associated with exchange theories – namely the lack of recognition of systematic inequalities. Second, our analysis posits that negotiations are reciprocal and consent is mutual, thereby suggesting that any relations of dependency tend to be complex and multidirectional. Although women and men have assets and resources which they control and may (re)allocate, these resources and consequent power are unequal. This formulation thus stands in contrast to the schema presented by exchange theorists who often characterize the exchange process and the resultant dependent social relation as unilateral.[18]

One can justifiably state that, in spite of the continuation of patriarchy in our day, the past was more replete with examples of androcentrism than the present. A woman-centered investigation of the past should take into special account the means by which women actively negotiated with men for a space for themselves.

Because the concept of negotiation suggests human agency, many local scholars find such an assertion irreconcilable with the more generally held notion of convents as total institutions. Erving Goffman described these as social establishments with an "encompassing or total character (that) is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors."[19] One can make an argument that past

18. Judith Gerson and Kathy Peiss, "Boundaries, Negotiation, Consciousness: Reconceptualizing Gender Relations," *Social Problems* 32, no. 4 (April 1985): 322.

19. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Chicago: Aldine, 1962), 4

and present communities of women religious (and men religious as well) can be categorized as total institutions: the affairs of its residents are mostly conducted within the confines of the buildings they occupy, all living under the direction of a superior who, among her many duties, see to it that the daily *horarium* is observed by everyone so that all the sisters can faithfully live by the call that drew them to these communities.

The most crucial problematic in applying Goffman's definition of total institutions to these communities is that it strongly underlines that the residents of these institutions lose their sense of autonomy. "Total institutions disrupt or defile…actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actors and those in their presence that they have some command over their world – that they are a person with 'adult' self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action"[20] On the contrary, letters, auto/biographies, juridical processes, and Rules of Life from the past show that women negotiated with the men ruling over them in order to transform their communities into unbounded spaces.

One proof to support this hypothesis on women religious negotiating for spaces of autonomy is the constant reference to *recogimiento* in documents written by Spanish-speaking *monjas* and *beatas* from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The word (or its other grammatical permutation) appears so frequently and shows how much these women valorized it and endeavored to preserve it within (as individuals) and among (as a community) them. For a long time, the word was simplistically translated to "retreat house" or "retreat". What this transliteration did was to reduce the phenomenon into a structural reality, which is farthest from what scholars now know about it. *Recogimiento* is classically understood as a "separation or interior abstraction of all that is earthly in order to meditate or contemplate."[21] The spiritual praxis or method of *recogimiento* entailed a physical/symbolic isolation or enclosure, a series of stages of meditation on "nothing" and a total denial of one's self to achieve union with God. Living *recogimiento* provided a space of autonomy for women in Spain, Latin America, and the Philippines. It was

20. Ibid., 43.

21. Melquiades Andrés Martín, *Los Recogidos: Nueva Vision de la Mistica Española (1500-1700* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1975), 36-37.

through this *modus vivendi* that they assumed a controlled behavior favored by the powers behind the throne and the church while, at the same time, it enabled them to fashion their *monasterios* and *beaterios* into spaces where they experienced relief from the patriarchy suppressing their womanhood. [22]

Another proof to justify the hypothesis is the epistolary form and style that these women religious employed. In a study of women's letters from 1400 to 1700, Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb showed that the form and language of their correspondences with men revealed the methods of persuasion they employed:

> The impact of a woman's letter depended on her claim to be taken seriously by the reader of the letter… (It) also depended on her self-presentation or self-fashioning, the way in which she represented the relationship between her and her correspondent. Effective strategies of persuasion depended on an acknowledgement of societal attitudes to women and to relationships that stayed relatively constant during the late medieval and early modern periods; at the same time, these women were able to find space to maneuver within the available discourses of truth and identity.[23]

Letters written by women religious which I have gathered show negotiation spaces, e.g., in the protection of their enclosure from the incursion of prelates and priests or in their expansion so that other women could be welcomed in it – with men in power. What I found interesting is that, in almost all cases, these women received the favorable response of their addressees – thus making me interested in analyzing the methods of persuasion that these *monjas* and *beatas* employed.

To conclude, I hope that the points raised could challenge everyone to reconsider the all-too-common imagination and

22. Nancy Van Deusen, *Between the Sacred and the Worldly: The Cultural and Institutional Practice of Recogimiento among Women in Colonial Lima* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 6-9.

23. Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb, eds., *Women's Letters across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 12.

representation of women religious (in history and the present) as passive sufferers. In my experience, when religious life (whether for women or men) is healthy and life-giving, it draws its individual members into a deeper valorization of the call that made them choose to throw their lots with each other. Sandra Schneiders advocated a rejection of the binary opposition contemplative-apostolic so prevalent in most religious communities.

> Every religious is called to the contemplative life, not as an accomplishment of other activities or as one feature among others, but as the every meaning and the end of the life they have undertaken. A religious life which is not contemplative (at whatever stage of development at a given time) is a contradiction in terms and tragically pointless.[24]

In the quest to understand women religious in history, too much emphasis on the functional dimension of the consecrated life can make one lose sight of the call that led to a life of voluntary celibacy. When I do this to myself and the subjects of my historical inquiry, religious life becomes a painfully onerous life. Women religious, then and now, have taught me as a man that truth is otherwise and negotiable.

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24. Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2002), 303.