

Catholic Feminist Ethics and Its Localization Prospect in the East-Asia Region (Take China as an Example)

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Abstract

With the unceasing liberation of people's ideology, the promotion of women's rights has been raised to unprecedented importance in today's society. Therefore, more and more theologians have started to re-examine the conventional Catholic doctrines through a critical lens, especially under the framework of moral philosophy. The author aims to explore two main conceptions deep-rooted in Catholic traditions or sacred books that are considered to convey gender inequality, for one decrees the inferior of the gender female to the gender male while the other emphasizes women's obedience to men's instructions. In addition, the author analyzes the origin of such conceptions, the dualistic theory, and how renowned Catholic feminists such as Margret Farley and Lisa Cahill managed to develop new comprehension towards Catholicism based on Catholic feminist ethics. While the modern spiritual movements are predominantly derived from Western experience, the application of theological innovations in the East-Asia region still depends on different, complex religious realities. In this article, the author takes China as an example and investigates how secularization may encourage the practice of Catholic feminist reformations in China.

Keywords: Catholicism, gender equality, moral philosophy, East-Asia, China, dualistic theory, secularization

1. Introduction

As modern feminism grows rapidly across the globe, more and more religious enthusiasts begin to join the relentless social campaigns to fight against stereotypical sexism and urge for equal rights regardless of gender in a variety of sociological aspects. Not only do they seek equality in terms of educational opportunities and career development, but also carefully consider the conflicts between traditional catholic theology and contemporary feminism. When rapid economic development and drastic social transitions take place in East Asia, imported Christianity collides fiercely with local communal and religious identities as western and eastern theological ideas gradually merge to shape the globalizing ideology of our next generation. Particularly, the process of secularization in various Asian countries has accelerated the fusion of religious ideas with the modern society, where a multitude of problems imposed by traditional canon collides with challenges from sympathizers of feminism, therefore triggering numerous reformations of antiquated rules; among those East-Asian countries, China is a very typical representative.

2. Problems Imposed by Traditional Catholic Canon

2.1 *The Subordination of Female to Male*

From the perspective of Catholic feminists, there has always been an inappropriate understanding of human nature and femininity in the Christian theological and ethical traditions. For example, in the Old Testament of the Bible, there are rules like "Women can inherit inheritance only if they have no male descendants", "Women are unclean after giving birth to children and during menstruation". Women used to be seen as an inferior species that could be possessed like livestock, and as impure objects who could not participate in the sacrament of Jehovah's worship. The New Testament also says that "women should remain silent in the church", and they are "lower than men in the created order".

These theological traditions have always emphasized the differences between men and women in order to prove their point that one gender can be inferior to another, and women are only "the second sex" subordinate to the major social gender of men. The source of such sexism can be traced back to the dualistic theory widely accepted

in Anglophone culture. The dualistic way of thinking tends to consider problems from two drastically opposing perspectives that pit the elements of transcendence and presence, mind and body, and life and death without seeing how they are interconnected. In the relationship between men and women, the dualistic way of thinking puts men and women in diametrical opposition, arguing that men represent rationality, positivity, autonomy, and kindness, while women represent emotion, passivity, dependence, and sin. Not only that, but this way of thinking holds that what men represent is higher and superior to what women represent, and thus, men are superior to women. Catholic feminist Rose-mary Ruether sharply criticized such disconnection, arguing that the deepest cause of sexism is such a dualistic mindset. Therefore, only by overcoming this false dualistic mindset can sexism in Catholicism be resolved.

2.2 The Compliance of Women With Men's Instructions

Although Augustinus Hippoensis emphasized that men and women possessed the same capacity for reasoning, he believed that women were to comply because women were made from and for men. Medieval scholastic theology also tended to look down on women. Thomas Aquinas' attitude towards women was basically the same as Augustine's, if not even worse. According to Aquinas, a man was the starting point and purpose of a woman; from a natural point of view, a woman must obey a man because a man's rational cognitive ability was stronger so that a woman was complementary to a man in terms of power and dignity. Therefore, Catholic feminist ethicists have concluded that traditional theology has always had the idea of patriarchy where women should comply with men's instructions because of their so-called "drawbacks". Therefore, most Catholic feminists believe that their first task is to reverse such Catholic ethical traditions. (Note 1)

3. Challenges From Modern Catholic Feminist Ethics Against Traditional Catholic Canon

3.1 A Critique of the Correlation Between Gender Differences and Corresponding Gender Roles

From the perspective of most feminist ethicists, although men and women are equal, they are by no means exactly the same. They are very different physically, emotionally, and mentally. The key issue is whether those natural differences between men and women should codify different gender roles and whether it means that women should not be entitled to the equitable right as men to participate in both public affairs and private affairs. In Margret Farley's view, "Setting the different societal roles based on gender inevitably leads to inequalities and constraints on people." (Note 2) Indeed, gender differences between men and women should not account for the deprivation of anyone's rights to receive education, get a job, or start their career, the right to participate in political life, the right to fair remuneration, and the right to share responsibilities in the family, the society, and the church. Denial of women's legitimate and reasonable rights and demands on the grounds of gender differences are therefore incorrect.

3.2 An Innovated Understanding of the Concept of Obedience

Currently, Catholic feminist ethicists express their new understandings of equality and obedience. They believe that the new moral theological paradigm of Christianity should advocate equality for all. This paradigm ought to reject the destructive unequal relationship between men and women, and states that the inequality between men and women is the root-cause of the oppression towards women.

Catholic feminist Lisa Cahill pointed out that both sexes are created in God's image, so they are equal in dignity, wisdom, and the ability to accomplish most things. Farley also pondered this egalitarian ethical model in more details, noting that an equal order of relations between men and women should be built on this idea: "Women are autonomous beings who have the rights that belong to all, are capable to take on leading roles in the public and private sectors, and have equal status and full reciprocity with men as well as with other women." (Note 3) She argues that equally respecting everyone is part of divine love, and one should love all people with the love of Christ because everyone is worthy of love for their intrinsic values. (Note 4)

4. The Localization Prospect of Catholic Feminist Reformations in China

4.1 Constructing the Positive Relationship Between Secularization and Catholic Feminist Ethics

Secularization is a sociology theory that was first put forward in the 1960s as a result of the rapid revolutions of technology and science in the western world by that time. It has many definitions, but it can be simply and generally understood as a societal change due to the modernization of the society, a process that religion and secular institutions gradually lose their ubiquitous status in real life, while the far-reaching influences of religious values are gradually removed from other fields such as politics, economy, and culture, etc. Therefore, it can be easily inferred that secularization encourages the query of the authority of all kinds of religions, including Catholicism, by their believers, which can entitle those radical Catholic feminists, such as Thomists Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, to the courage and opportunities to criticize Catholic traditions for making "individual

conscience unduly subordinate to ecclesiastical authorities and norms.”

4.2 *Secularization in Chinese History and the Prospect of Catholic Feminist Revolutions in China*

After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, the Vatican once attempted to interfere with the internal affairs in new China by infiltrating religion into the nation’s political administration, which aroused the indignation of many patriotic Catholics. On November 30, 1950, Priest Wang Liangzuo in Sichuan province together with more than 500 Catholics made a declaration that Chinese Catholicism no longer had any relationship with imperialism. From June to August in 1957, a conference regarding the localization of Catholicism was held in Beijing, and the meeting decided to advocate a complete separation of domestic political and economic affairs from religious activities. This event marked the beginning of the secularization of Catholicism in China, and in the following years, such secularization received great support from the Chinese government including financial budgets, religious venues, and local community publicity. More importantly, the rapidly growing and expanding social media platforms in China provide a valuable chance for catholic feminist ethics to be recognized by more enthusiasts in a huge 1.4 billion population. A variety of online platforms like WeChat and TikTok offer even greater chances of exposure for feminist ideas among ”Generation Z”, known as the new generation born between 1997 and 2012, which sets a firm foundation for a great prospect of Catholic feminist revolutions since younger generations tend to embrace religious innovations and modern ideologies more easily.

5. Conclusion

As more and more Catholic feminists like Sister Margaret Farley arise with challenges against traditional theological views, modern sociological innovations have never been so closely integrated with empirical religious ideas. We could observe more on how the conflation of local religions like Taoism and Buddhism with Catholic Christianity impacts revolutions on existing religious canon and rituals. Furthermore, the fusion of these different religious conceptions offers great potential for more innovations in pursuit of equal rights on a feminist ground. China is a symptomatic example of East-Asian countries in the process of rapid globalization in not only economic, but also ideological, cultural, and especially religious sectors, where the influences of traditional Confucianism undeniably shape the foundation of social norms. With abundant support from the central administrative policies, conjoint efforts from local Catholic communities and local governments would certainly guarantee an anticipated prospect of Catholic feminist ethics.

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Notes

Note 1. Hans Kung, "Great Christian thinkers", *Sociological Studies* (2001) p. 111-112.

Note 2. Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution" *Theological Studies* 36, p. 630

Note 3. Farley, "Feminist Ethics", *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Traditions*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 8.

Note 4. Lisa Cahill, "Feminist Ethics", *Theological Studies* 51(1990) p. 50.

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