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Catholic Feminism and Asian Religious Traditions: Rethinking Christ's Offices of Priest, Prophet, and King

Tracy S. Tiemeier

Catholic feminists can be accused of focusing too much on issues such as women's ordination when women around the world are facing immediate crises such as domestic violence, rape, "honor killings," sex-selective abortions, and femicide. To the extent that some feminists may focus only on women's participation in the institutional Church without connecting their work to the real lives of women around the globe, the critique is fair. But physical and spiritual violence are inextricably connected in a Church that teaches that all are created in God's image yet segregates men and women into essentialized binaries and defines women by their biological function. Christians have a long history of denying women their baptismal gifts, gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit; and teachings on "woman's" place in the Church serve to sustain or even justify misogynistic cultural attitudes and practices. As a result, the ways in which the Catholic hierarchy misunderstands and excludes women from all levels of Christian life are inextricably connected to the approaches the Church takes in addressing women's oppression. My goal here is to provide several resources for a renewed Catholic feminism that are drawn from real women's lives and reveal women to be important religious leaders for their communities.

I begin with lessons drawn from Asian women, who deal with violence on an everyday basis. Although Asian women often deal with life-crushing violence and oppression, they

refuse to be defeated. In these contexts, enacting liberative possibilities and realizing liberating spiritualities often require moving beyond the rigid boundaries of the visible Church. I draw on this liberative “syncretism” in order to open up possibilities for contemporary Catholic feminism. Toward that end, I focus on how three Asian women’s religious roles—Okinawan priestesses, Korean shamans, and Hindu female gurus—can reconfigure the traditional Christian offices of priest, prophet, and king. To understand these traditional Christic offices, I focus on how the Catholic Church in Vatican II (1962–65) has understood these offices to apply to the laity, as women are largely placed in this category. Priestesses, shamans, and gurus all prove women to be capable religious leaders who subvert dominant cultural attitudes on women and challenge magisterial Catholic teaching on women’s “essential” place in the Church. Okinawan priestesses show women as authoritative ritual leaders; Korean shamans illustrate the power of women to discern the Spirit in the world; and finally, Hindu female gurus demonstrate women as effective mediators and images of the (female) divine. Such resources from Asian religious traditions provide women-centric images for rethinking the Church and women’s power within the Church. From this renewed place, Catholic women and men can work within a more just Church and be better equipped to address contemporary sexist social structures.

ASIAN WOMEN’S THEOLOGIES

Poverty and violence are everyday realities for many Asian women. Cultural privileging of males is connected to religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, all which have texts and traditions that can be used to justify sexist beliefs and practices.

In all spheres of Asian society, women are dominated, dehumanized, and de-womanized; they are discriminated against, exploited, harassed, sexually used, abused, and viewed as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to ... [men]. In the home, church, law, education, and media, women have been treated with bias and condescension. In Asia and all over the world, the myth of subservient, servile Asian women is blatantly peddled to reinforce the dominant male ... [interest].¹

Western colonialism is also at fault. In imperial discourse Asian men were demasculinized and caricaturized as effeminate. At the same time, the colonizers argued that Asian women needed to be “protected” from so-called “uncivilized natives.” Ironically, some Asian men used the control of Asian women as a way to reassert power. As a result, Asian women were colonized by both sides in the struggle for political and cultural power in Asia, and taught to no longer trust in their inherent authority and value.²

Although the victimization of Asian women is a popular narrative, it is not the whole story. Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung says,

What does it mean to be fully human for Asian women when their bodies are beaten, torn, choked, burnt, and dismembered? Asian women have reflected on this hard question out of their broken-body experiences, searching for ways to survive as human beings with a sense of self-worth and purpose. Privately and publicly ... they have expressed their survival wisdom from the underside of patriarchal history through poems, songs, and stories.... They ... know they will perish without a vision of life in its fullness.³

Asian women show resilience in the face of suffering. They write their own stories, dream their own dreams, and create a better reality for women in Asia. Indian theologian and poet Aruna Gnanadason proclaims,

I stand here unflinching,

As wave after mighty wave hits at me ...
 Rips into my face ... , my body,
 Cuts into my heart ...
 Wave after mighty wave hits at us,
 But we stand here undaunted,
 Unafraid ...
 Because we hold each other tenderly
 In the warm circle of feminist power ...
 This arm encircles the pain of the violence
 he inflicted on you my sister,
 And that one embraces the hurt of a woman
 marginalized by her colour and her race.
 This arm encircles the woman who is a victim
 of rape and abuse in a war-torn country,
 And that embraces you my sister who are too old,
 or too fragile, or too ill.
 This arm encircles the woman who is just too lonely,
 too isolated and very alone,
 And that embraces my lesbian sister
 who experiences violence at every turn.
 This arm encircles the tears of a woman who has
 lost a son—a victim to malnutrition,
 And that embraces the wounded feet and hands
 of a girl child who has been sexually abused...
 Yes, we hold each other up in a circle of feminist power,
 And we stand here unflinching;
 We stand here unafraid ...
 We look into each other's eyes with courage and energy,
 A circle of life ... of resilient power ... and of love.
 We hold each other up in a circle of feminist power ...
 And we dance ... and we dance ... and we dance ...⁴

Such visions create life-giving realities in the midst of life-crushing realities. As a result, while the concrete realities of Asian women are often fraught with violence, there is still much room for liberative praxis.

Popular Asian women's practices also demonstrate the resilience and creativity of women. There is a real sense of a

sacred, women's world, the world of home altars, storytime, home rituals and remedies, mahjongg games, and grandma's knee. Such places can be powerful and saturated with grace. As many Asian and Pacific Islander women age, they are more and more revered, their place in the family rising in importance along with their age. (The opposite often happens to men: once prized, they slowly decline in their importance. For example, my Japanese American grandfather defers to my grandmother in ways he never did before.) Asian women are often the keepers of traditions, the bestowers of blessings, the tellers of stories. Although we should not romanticize women's traditions and worlds—my Japanese American grandmother has simultaneously passed on very painful patriarchal lessons (such as her preference for her son, my brother, and my husband) at the same time as her life-giving matriarchal lessons (such as the secrets of the family altar and other home rituals)—Asian women in their many spiritual practices offer all of us powerful pictures of women in their lives and spiritual paths. Even more, they offer us fascinating images of God: in tending their altars, in home rituals, in healing, in storytelling, in teaching, and in mediating the divine. Such images of the female divine complement—even challenge—other images of God and offer us more complex ways of imagining our spiritual paths.

In finding creative ways of enduring and flourishing, Asian women often draw from multiple places: home traditions, popular indigenous practices, and multiple religious traditions. In weaving these together, they create their own liberative and new traditions of hope. Orthodoxy becomes less important than liberative orthopraxy. Chung Hyun Kyung says,

In their struggle for survival and liberation in this unjust, women-hating world, poor Asian women have approached many different religious sources for sustenance and empowerment. What matters for them is not doctrinal orthodoxy.... What matters to Asian women is survival and the

liberation of themselves and their communities. What matters for them is not Jesus, Sakyamuni, Mohammed, Confucius, Kwan In, or Ina, but rather the life force which empowers them to claim their humanity. Asian women selectively have chosen life-giving elements of their culture and religions and have woven new patterns of religious meaning.⁵

We Asian women must move away from our imposed fear of losing Christian identity, in the opinion of the mainline theological circles, and instead risk that we might be transformed into truly *Asian* Christians. We have to ask tough questions of the mainline Christian churches and seminaries and also of ourselves. Who *owns* Christianity?⁶

In a well-known incident at the 1991 World Council of Churches Assembly, Chung performed a Spirit-calling ritual drawn from Korean shamanism.⁷ While many were enthusiastic, others were highly critical of Chung's "syncretism."⁸ In defending herself, she argued that her preferential option for Korean women (and all the poor) required breaking down the rigid boundaries between religions.⁹ Thus, an exclusivist understanding of Christianity is simply inadequate for Asian women. Asian women can be their own creative practitioners and even their own powerful sites of religious authority, developing their own ways of "life-giving" religion.

Indeed, many Asian and Asian American theologians have emphasized that Christianity has been "syncretistic" from the very beginning.¹⁰ At every step along the way, Christianity has been changed by its religious, cultural, and sociopolitical context. Early Jewish Christianity shifted as it gained traction in the Roman Empire; it also changed as early Christian missionaries moved East to India and even China; it adapted to Northern European religious and cultural demands. There isn't, then, one Christianity that can be easily categorized, maintained, and controlled. In this sense, then, the search for resources of a theology of liberation (Asian, feminist, or otherwise) cannot be confined to an essentialized under-

standing of Christianity. Christianity has been interreligious and multireligious from its very beginnings. We can—and should—look beyond the visible Church in the search for liberative realities.

Liberative “syncretism,” then, has historical warrant; but the significance of multireligious theologies for a renewed Catholic feminism is also given support by the very real demands of the twenty-first century. It is increasingly impossible to ignore the religious plurality of a globalized and globalizing world. Of course, religious diversity is characteristic of most Asian contexts, but this is now becoming true of most global contexts (especially in this Internet Age). Interreligious dialogue is required to know our “neighbors” (whoever and wherever they might be); and ideally this dialogue will lead to a transformative relationship where partners can learn about each other and themselves in light of each other. Therefore, learning about how women in other religious traditions take on public religious roles will teach us about those women; but it will also allow us to think about ourselves in a new way.

PRIEST AND PRIESTESS: WOMEN’S RITUAL LEADERSHIP

To discuss women and the priesthood is quite complicated in Roman Catholic theology. This is because women are not formally ordained; yet Catholic tradition does recognize that all Christians, including women, share in Christ’s priestly office. In order to understand, then, how women might participate in the office without themselves being formally ordained, I look at how Vatican II’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)” explains the laity’s share in the office of the priesthood.

To them [the laity], whom he [Jesus] intimately joins to his

life and mission, he also gives a share in his priestly office of offering spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humanity. Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the holy Spirit, are marvelously called and prepared so that ever richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, if accomplished in the Spirit, become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ: their prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, even the hardships of life if patiently borne (see Pet 2:5). In the celebration of the Eucharist, these are offered to the Father in all piety along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.¹¹

In connecting the priestly office with the ordained ministry, the “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Prebyterorum Ordinis*),” explains:

The Lord Jesus “whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world” (Jn 10:36) gave his whole mystical body a share in the anointing of the Spirit with which he was anointed (see Mt 3:16; Lk 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38). In that body all the faithful are made a holy and kingly priesthood, they offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and they proclaim the mighty acts of him who has called them out of darkness into his admirable light (see 1 Pet 2:5, 9). Therefore there is no such thing as a member who does not have a share in the mission of the whole body. Rather, all the members ought to reverence Jesus in their hearts (see Pet 3:15) and by the spirit of prophecy give testimony to Jesus.

However, the Lord also appointed certain men as ministers, in order that they might be united in one body in which “all the members have not the same function” (Rom. 12:4). These men held in the community of the faithful the sacred power of order, that of offering sacrifice and forgiving sins, and exercised the priestly office publicly on behalf of men and women in the name of Christ.¹²

Thus, while all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ, ordained persons are specially set apart to public ordained life. Characteristic of the office of priesthood, however, is the universal call to offer sacrifice. Laypersons do not offer sacrifices ritually or sacramentally, but do so spiritually as they “consecrate the world.” In this way, then, women are not excluded from the priesthood of all believers. They may “consecrate the world” in innumerable ways, even if they cannot do so in public ordained life.

In limiting the ordained priesthood to men, however, the Church has effectively denied women the possibility of ritual and sacramental leadership. This continues to cause controversy and even public disobedience (through, for example, the womenpriest movement), despite the fact that the hierarchy considers the issue closed to debate. In recent years, the ongoing debate over women’s ordination in the Catholic Church has shifted from whether or not women can act *in persona Christi* to the question of the authority of unbroken Tradition.¹³ Even so, scholars have questioned this “unbroken” Tradition, as well as the nature of Tradition, which is dynamic and unfolding, rather than static and unchanging.¹⁴ However, perhaps more fundamental to the debate over women’s ordination is theological anthropology and the role of gender in spiritual roles. Does sexuality lead to essentially different somatic experiences and therefore different religious-cultural roles? Catholics have lined up on both sides of the issue, and the issue appears to be at a stalemate. Looking at a tradition where gender is ritually significant and yet leads to a radically different conclusion may provide a resource for thinking anew about the question.

The Ryukyu Islands of Japan (Okinawa) bear witness to women as the primary religious leaders. Not unlike many other parts of Asia, women are the dominant ritual practitioners in the home. What is remarkable, however, is that women are not silenced ritually once they cross the thresh-

old of the home and enter public space. Priestesses perform rituals for their towns, both in sacred groves and in village squares.¹⁵ Traditional familial responsibilities—for sisters to be spiritual protectors of their brothers, and wives to be spiritual protectors of their families—lead women out into public religious life.¹⁶ All women, then, have spiritual power (*shiji*); female religious leaders simply have a greater share of that power.¹⁷

In traditional Okinawan life, women function publicly as priestesses (*onarigami*) and shamans (*yuta*):

Onarigami [priestesses], who are, for example, members of the village ritual organization, village priestesses, and the clan priestesses (*okode*), perform their rituals usually for a certain group of persons, related through ties of blood and/or earth. They are usually selected for their post through the gods but have little official training. ... They embody the gods or ancestors during certain rites.... They are never paid for their services. *Yuta* [shamans], on the other hand, are also usually women but are in general not related by blood to their clients. Clients might even travel far to seek the advice of a famous “shaman.” The *yuta*’s advice is predominantly solicited in cases of severe illness or prolonged bad luck for an individual or his/her family. The *yuta* herself mostly has experienced severe bouts of chronic illness accompanied by hallucination and so on. Through this experience, the ancestors communicate to her and call on her to become a *yuta*.... Diagnostics of a *yuta* usually reveal that the ancestors might want more regular services and offerings, the ancestral tablet of a certain member of their clan to be transferred to a different clan or branch of the clan, or a certain living member of the clan to become a priestess, and so on.¹⁸

While women dominate in religious leadership, men dominate in political leadership. Theoretically, anyone can be headman or priestess;¹⁹ but as a general rule, there is a clear gender complementarity. However, social leadership is

shared: women wield spiritual power and men wield political power, without one dominating the other.²⁰

The complementarity illustrated by the case of Okinawan priestesses grants almost full ritual authority (public *and* private) to women. This is based on the cultural construction of women as spiritual guardians. If women are spiritual guardians in the home, they are also most appropriate for public ritual authority. Such construction of a gender complementarity is not unlike official Catholic understanding of sex and gender, which also teaches that gender differences yield different religiocultural roles. However, there is at least one significant difference: men are not generally outright barred from becoming Okinawan priestesses because there does not seem to be a rigid ideology of complementarity that actively works against male religious leadership.²¹ This is not the case for Catholic teaching, which strictly focuses women's vocation on motherhood and consecrated virginity without viewing it through the lens of ritual/sacramental power. Catholic complementarity therefore does not offer women places of ritual authority (though Catholic women's ritual authority is popularly expressed, particularly in Marian traditions, home circles, layled liturgies, etc.).

Okinawan priestesses can help rethink the office of the priesthood by allowing Catholic feminists to reclaim the ritual authority and power of the female body. Bodies matter. Sexuality matters. Even socially constructed gender matters. Indeed, through our sexual and sensual bodies, both men and women have ritual power. (After all, the history of asceticism in Christianity attests to the power of the body in spiritual practice.) The universal call to priesthood is therefore not merely a "spiritual" calling to sacrifice that is offered apart from bodily experiences, but is an embodied, ritual one. From private, home practices to public, institutional practices, women and men are leaders through their bodies, and not despite them. Because of our many embodied

differences (including gender and sexuality, but also including such embodied differences as race/ethnicity, nationality, age, point in history, etc.), we think, act, and live in different ways. To be human is to embody difference; and these differences complement each other. But such “complementarities” cannot be reduced to one binary opposition of male/female; nor do they outright predetermine people.

What seems most problematic, then, in Catholic anthropology is not that there would be any (socially constructed or even innate) differences between men and women that are suggestive for religious thought and practice; but rather, it is the rigidity with which complementarity is understood, outright excluding women from any real ritual power. This functions, on the one hand, to overvalue the male body for ritual leadership and undervalue the female body. Ultimately, Catholic women and men must see female ritual authority extended into the public sphere through ordination. Christ’s priestly office is a public office that women must have a share in, if they are to be able to be truly Christians. Although not all may be specially called to public Catholic ordination, all are certainly called to the office of the priesthood. Public ordination is simply a special recognition of the privilege and responsibility extended to all believers. Women must be included in this public acclamation if they truly share in the office as Christians and imitators of Christ.

PROPHET AND SHAMAN:

DISCERNING THE SPIRIT IN THE MODERN WORLD

Prophets function as divinely appointed messengers bearing God’s word to the world. They are charismatic figures, rather than institutional ones, and even often function as deliberate gadflies of the institution. In this sense, the offices of priest and prophet seem to be in tension. And yet, Vatican II

brings the office of prophecy firmly within the institutional body of Christ.

Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word. Until the full manifestation of his glory, he fulfils this prophetic office, not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name and by his power, but also through the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with an appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and the grace of the word (see Acts 2:17-18; Apoc 19:10) so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life....

As the sacraments of the New Law, which nourish the life and the apostolate of the faithful, prefigure the new heaven and the new earth (see Apoc 21:1), so too the laity become powerful heralds of the faith in things to be hoped for (see Heb 11:1) if they unhesitatingly join the profession of faith to the life of faith.²²

All Christians have a share in Christ's prophetic office to proclaim the kingdom in life and word. For the hierarchy the prophetic office specifically involves its teaching authority, but for the laity, to be a divinely appointed messenger of God is especially manifest in how laypeople bear witness to their faith to each other and their children.

The responsibility of Christians to bear witness to their faith raises important questions: How exactly does one bear witness to his or her faith in the context of his or her own life? How does a person (either in the hierarchy or in the laity) discern the Spirit? What happens when women and other persons excluded from the hierarchy discern the Spirit's work quite differently than those in the hierarchy? Despite the rather sanguine description in *Lumen Gentium*, biblical witness of the prophets (including Christ) illustrates that prophets are often directly in opposition to those who have the religious power and authority to interpret God's will. The discernment of the Spirit is therefore complicated, as

responsibility rests ultimately on the individual.

The tension between the individual person's responsibility to bear witness to their faith (and therefore discern where the Spirit is in his or her life) and the hierarchy's power to teach in Christ's name and power seems impassable; for the realities of finitude and sin mean that not only can individual laypersons be wrong, but so can those in the hierarchy (regardless of the authority of their office). What this means for women is that they need ways of thinking of the prophetic office that both empower them individually to be active agents for God and to discern the Spirit in and for the world, whether that Spirit is calling them to dissent from the hierarchy or submit to it. Both of these goals can be addressed by looking briefly at Korean shamans, who are very much like modern-day prophets. Korean shamans are ritual specialists who speak to, on behalf of, and as the spirits.²³ This "spirit talk" is characteristic of the Korean shamanic ritual and can be loosely analogous to the discernment of the Spirit in the world. While men can be shamans, the overwhelming majority of Korean shamans are women. Not only are most shamans female, most clients are also female.²⁴ This provides an interesting women-centric view of prophecy and interpreting "Spirit-talk" in the world.

Shamans specialize in misfortune. Everyday material realities are inexorably bound with spiritual realities. Shamans play an essential role in society by diagnosing the spiritual cause of material problems like illness or economic distress. Full of *han* (or "resentment"), those who die under unfortunate circumstances pester the living and cause the living to experience a whole host of material misfortune. Shamans release and transform the *han*, helping the living to regain their good fortune and the dead to be healed. The ability to communicate with the spirits, then, is the key to understanding the cause of the client's distress and the particular problem of the spirit-world.

The “calling” of a shaman occurs through an oftentimes traumatic event, after which a woman finds herself able to communicate with and manage the spirits.

[There are a] great variety of misfortunes which shamans have experienced: forced marriage; children’s death; divorce; husband’s death; early widowhood; illness; family debt; and so on. Together with experience of the spirit world ... the experience of misfortune is an important constituent of ‘the shamanic complex’... , which transforms shamans from patients into healers.... As a result, the misfortunes which shamans experience are often explained as ‘the symptoms of shamanic destiny’ or “‘the signs of shamanic calling.’... In this context, shamanism is a framework of managing the experience of misfortune, and the so-called ‘shamanic initiation’ is a transformation of the experience of misfortune into a relationship with the spirits within the framework of shamanism.²⁵

Because of its association with misfortune, shamanism is not therefore considered a socially privileged position. Nevertheless, some women “have taken on the role of shaman as a way of resolving the misfortunes they were facing.”²⁶ Thus, although not considered a socially advantageous career, shamanism has been an important position for Korean women to be personally empowered to transform their own misfortune.²⁷ As a result, Korean shamans not only function to help others (living and dead) with their spiritual and material problems, they are able to shape their own lives in positive ways that undercut their difficult experiences.

Korean shamanism can teach women and all individuals that they can be empowered in very oppressive and difficult situations to transform their *han* and reclaim their lives in direct contact to the Spirit. The personal experience of misfortune in one’s life connects women to the spirit world. Through this connection, women can heal and transform their lives and the world. Women therefore need not be seen

as “mere” victims of circumstances. They can actively diagnose the problems in their own lives, and in the lives of others, and offer healing through their work. Just as Vatican II affirms the prophetic office as the many ways in which persons witness to their faith, Korean shamans are active witnesses to their lives and faith.

For Korean shamanism it is the spirits who give unmediated power and authority to communicate with them. This can make a comparison with hierarchical Catholic understandings of prophecy problematic. Korean shamans have direct access to the spiritworld in a way that is simply not present in Catholic teaching. However, while *Lumen Gentium* gives special authority to the hierarchy to “teach in his name and by his power,” it falls even to the laity to interpret God’s will in the context of their lives in order that they might better know, love, and bear witness to God. Thus, while the hierarchy does have some mediating role, direct and personal discernment of the Spirit is still an essential requirement for the laity. Everyone has the authority to teach in and through the Spirit of Christ. This responsibility means that women and laypersons must be open to the hierarchy, if there is a disagreement on how to discern the Spirit, but it also means that the hierarchy must be open to women and other witnesses to the Spirit, who may be offering a divinely inspired critique to unjust structures of power.

KING AND GURU: REPRESENTING THE (FEMALE) DIVINE

Ancient concepts of kingship are largely lost on us today, but they have nevertheless left their mark on Christian imagination, which continues to view God as king and lord even in modern democratic societies. For Vatican II,

Christ, obedient to the point of death and because of this

exalted by the Father (see Phil 2:8-9), has entered into the glory of his kingdom. All things are subjected to him until he subjects himself and all created things to the Father, so that God may be all in all (see 1 Cor 15:27-28). He communicated this power to the disciples that they too may be established in royal liberty and, by a holy life of self-denial, overcome the reign of sin in themselves (see Rom 6:12), and indeed that by serving Christ in others they may through humility and patience bring their sisters and brothers to that King to serve whom is to reign. The Lord desires that his kingdom be spread by the lay faithful also: the kingdom of truth and life, the kingdom of holiness and grace, the kingdom of justice, love, and peace. In this kingdom, creation itself will be set free from the slavery of corruption and will obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God (see Rom 8:21). Clearly, a great promise, a great commandment is given to the disciples: "all things are yours, you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor 3:23).²⁸

The office of kingship therefore is a dialectical reality between servant and lord, extravagance and asceticism, obedience and freedom. How this works in the everyday lives of individuals is complicated, for Christians are simultaneously free of, and subject to, all in Christ. What might it mean to represent a sovereign and utterly free God who manifests as the Servant-God? A brief study of Hindu female gurus can open up this dialectical reality for a renewed Catholic feminism.

The Hindu guru is a person who is completely self-realized and immersed in ultimate reality (*brahman*).²⁹ Oftentimes initiated into a formal lineage of instruction, gurus sometimes are self-initiated.³⁰ "The guru is a representative of a specific religious tradition, has a publicly recognized status, and has a universal authority to teach. The guru ... [is] a transmitter of salvific teachings."³¹ Gurus are teachers of ultimate reality, but devotion to them also comprises the very path to realization of that reality. In this way, the human guru is also divine.

Although gurus are traditionally male, many women, past and present, have become gurus. Importantly, the role of the guru does not change depending on the gender of the guru.³² What female gurus do challenge, however, are entrenched social expectations for women. The ascetic life is ideal for the guru, yet the social pressure for women to marry and have children have led female gurus to develop that ascetical ideal in multiple directions.

Several of the (recent well-known) female gurus are or were married: Sita Devi's husband passed away before she became a guru; Anandamayi Ma was married but her marriage was not consummated, and her husband was a disciple; Meera Ma is married but her husband does not play a role in her mission; and Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati was married and has three children, but withdrew from her family prior to becoming a guru. Some of the female gurus were never married, though their desire to remain unmarried caused conflict in their families; these include Gauri Ma and Ammachi. In the case of some of the female gurus who were never married, the issue does not seem to have created conflict in their families; these include Jayashri Ma, Karunamayi Ma, Gurumayi, and Shree Maa. In all cases, their status as guru is in large part constituted by their present asceticism; thus, if a guru was or is married, this relationship is subordinated to her status as guru.³³

The emphasis on asceticism in the life of the guru therefore means that the sexuality of female gurus is deemphasized. Ascetical practices bring perfection to gurus, allowing female gurus to do things that would otherwise be unacceptable for women. They also bring female gurus to a permanent state of purity: normally, women cycle in and out of states of purity, due to menstruation and childbirth.³⁴ "For example, Anandamayi Ma went from ... [completely covering herself] ... to appearing before thousands with her head and face uncovered, framed by her long unbound hair. An

assumption of purity had to accompany such a gesture, in order that it not be viewed as shameful.”³⁵ The purity and perfection ascribed to gurus is both moral and ontological. Female gurus therefore become authoritative teachers and public figures who are able to flout social norms in a way unthinkable for many other Hindu women. This is not to say that the womanhood of a female guru is not significant; rather, the emphasis on the ascetical life of gurus allows for female gurus to subvert prescribed social roles and enter public space as absolute religious authorities.

At the same time, female gurus are believed to be the embodiment of *shakti*, power itself, which is understood to be female.³⁶ *Shakti* is energy; *shakti* is the fundamental power of the gods; *shakti* is Goddess. Female gurus, then, are associated with the Goddess, are identified with the Goddess, are incarnations of the Goddess. Although female gurus are not universally accepted, except by those lineages who initiate them and those devotees who follow them, the female guru is a religious leader who proves the ability of women to be authoritative teachers and even mediators of the divine. Female gurus have become mainstream in the twenty-first century, having huge followings inside—and outside—of India. Such mainstream success is challenging traditional Hindu understandings of gender, bringing large numbers of men and women to Hinduism, and offering images of female teachers and the female divine to even more people across the globe.

The role of the modern guru has pervaded popular consciousness, even in Western circles, making it an interesting resource for rethinking the office of the king. Vatican II places in delicate balance freedom from all as king and obedience in serving Christ in others, clearly manifest in the humility one owes the hierarchy (which represents Christ in a unique way). Thus Christians are both free and bound, just as Christ is both free and bound. Kingship is therefore a delicate dance of sovereignty over all and duty toward others.

Hindu female gurus also illustrate a complicated dialectic (although on an individual, rather than institutional, level): there is an important link between the two views of king and guru on the significance of asceticism and self-denial. On the one hand, their ascetical practices downplay and subvert traditional gender assumptions; on the other, it is—in part—the gender of female gurus that makes them fit to incarnate female power, *shakti*. They represent and mediate the female divine in a unique way. While male gurus incarnate male divinity, the discourse of *shakti* assumes that all things are ultimately enlivened by *shakti* (without *shakti*, the god Shiva is said to be *shava*, a corpse). Male and female aspects of the divine are therefore both necessary, working in consort with each other. This would require both male and female participation, and even giving a prominent place to women who communicate *shakti* (although in reality, many Hindu traditions still deny women real public religious power, instead relegating them to home traditions). Thus women (and men) are not “free” from their bodies in the sense that sexuality and gender do not matter. Men communicate the infinitely multifaceted divine in a particular way, and women communicate the infinitely multifaceted divine in a particular way. Ascetical practices do free persons from social expectations and limitations, but they do so in order to purify us and allow us to better represent and communicate the divine. Our bodies can image the divine more effectively, even if they are still gendered bodies. As a result, the dialectic of freedom and obedience found in the image of a servant-king is complexified when placed next to Hindu female gurus. *Lumen Gentium* points toward the significance of self-denial when speaking of how the disciples overcome sin in themselves. Hindu female gurus emphasize even more that our very bodies are sites of freedom and limitation, where bodily disciplines both free us societally and allow us to better channel the divine through our gendered bodies. At the same

time, this bodily dialectic allows us to interact in the world in ways we could never have imagined before. Bound by the divine that we communicate, we are empowered to cross religious and social boundaries in order to bear the divine to the world. In this way, women cannot simply yield to the hierarchy (although this may be prudent at times). Sometimes it is the hierarchy that must yield in obedience and humility to the God/dess born of women.

Finally, female images of the divine are a profound corrective to dominant male images like that of the king. Although Christian theology does not teach a gendered God/dess, human imagination inevitably creates images of the divine dependent on our social constructions and assumptions. Indeed, the doctrine of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is already gendered, even if a proper understanding of the Trinity does not ascribe bodily gender to the Trinity. Images of the divine like Hindu female gurus will therefore go a long way in counteracting any Christian tendency to reify male images and presumed male characteristics. Women can and do represent and mediate the divine, and the image of the female guru who mediates the female divine can problematize androcentric language like Father, Son, king, and lord. If we place the image of the female guru who mediates *shakti* next to these male images, we are challenged to make room for other ways of imagining the divine, as well as other ways of imagining female leadership.

THE SEARCH FOR A CATHOLIC FEMINISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

For the most part, priestesses, shamans, and gurus are popularly appointed or are recognized by institutional structures that are not highly stratified. Although often a part of mainstream religious thought and practice, they nevertheless operate outside of institutional behemoths like the Roman

Catholic Church. As a result, appropriating the insights of Asian women religious leaders into a renewed Catholic feminism is admittedly fraught with complications. And yet, as Vatican II illustrates, the Catholic Church already attempts to dance delicately around the reality that there is a special place for the Catholic hierarchy and the reality that all persons are individually called in the midst of their own lives to act as priest, prophet, and king. To view priest, prophet, and king through the lenses of priestesses, shamans, and gurus only heightens the tension, for the lesson taught by these women is that individuals are directly called by the divine in sometimes unexpected ways and that women are powerful (sometimes privileged) sites of divine communication and presentation. They are more than capable of challenging, changing, and leading institutional structures. In fact, women are called to do so.

Learning from priestesses, shamans, and gurus does not require of Christians that they accept these religious traditions as Absolute Truth. But it does require the recognition that spiritual insight and grace occur outside the bounds of the visible Church. Such “syncretism” need not undermine faith, but in many cases can strengthen it. A syncretistic imagination can provide renewed ways of bringing about women’s participation in the Church and empower them to see God as active in their lives, ministries, and embodied realities. Such a Catholic feminist spirituality is likely to be troublesome, for it refuses to dissent in silence, but dares to dream out loud and recreate spiritual practices that emphasize women’s flourishing over obedience. At the same time, it is not ignorant of careful discernment of the Spirit in ways that may be unsettling or unexpected. This holds true not only for women discerning the Spirit but also for the hierarchy which must come to truly view women and other excluded persons as priests-priestesses, prophets-shamans, and kings-gurus. Although this means there will inevitably be tension

between hierarchical interpretations of women's roles in the Church and women's liberative-syncretistic imaginations, this tension can be creative if given space to ferment: it does not throw out traditional categories like priest, prophet, and king, but it does dare to reinterpret them—even radically—through female categories and visions.

I am not suggesting that we switch from a male-dominated institution to a female-dominated one. Rather, by rethinking dominant androcentric categories through gynocentric ones, both men and women may find spiritualities that allow them to be Catholic *and* feminist, individually empowered *and* structurally just. If all Christians are called to the Christic offices of priest, prophet, and king, no one should be excluded from public performance of those offices simply because of gender or sexuality. In fact, Okinawan priestesses, Korean shamans, and Hindu female gurus can show how some understandings of complementarity can lead to public roles for women. Rather than denying the significance of body and gender, then, Catholic feminists can offer strategies and practices that honor the power of female embodiment and open up the structures of the Church. Working together with our syncretistic imaginations, we can all work to make our institutional structures open to the contributions of women and collaborate more effectively to end the heart-breaking realities of violence against women in the world today.

Millions of women are crucified every day: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The alarming rates of violence against women today threaten to lead us to pessimism, militarism, or disengagement. But this oppression is not the final answer, just as the crucifixion is not the final answer but is one aspect of the Christian story. Women are not only victims; rather, as Asian women prove, they work actively to create their own liberating stories and realities. Christian faith in the resurrection and active work toward the reign of God is made manifest precisely in their syncretistic imagi-

nations and lives. To reimagine the Christic offices of priest, prophet, and king as priestess, shaman, and guru, then, is to affirm that women are much more than victims, but are images of Christ in the active ministry of life, death, and resurrection. As priest-priestesses, they have ritual authority and power through their bodies; as prophet-shamans, they can discern the Spirit who speaks directly to them as they work to transform the oppression in their lives into liberation; and as king-gurus, they are authoritative teachers who represent the divine in the world. To recognize this will require opening up the Catholic hierarchy to women—in ordination, in consultation, and in learning from their actual life stories (rather than abstract theories)—so that, together, we may work to build a just world for all persons.

NOTES

¹ The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), “Final Statement: Asian Church Women Speak,” Manila, 1985, as quoted in Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 40.

² See Chung, *Struggle to be*, 36–43.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴ Aruna Gnanadason, *No Longer a Secret: The Church and Violence against Women*, rev. ed. (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1993), 62–63.

⁵ Chung, *Struggle to be*, 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Kirsteen Kim, “Spirit and ‘spirits’ at the Canberra assembly of the World Council of Churches,” *Missiology* 32, no. 3 (July 2004): 349–65, at 349–50. For a full text of the speech, see Chung Hyun-Kyung, “Welcome the Spirit; hear her cries,” Canberra, 1991, accessed July 15, 2009, www.cta-usa.org/foundationdocs/foundhyunkyung.html; Chung Hyun Kyung, “Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation,” in *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report of the Seventh Assembly of the WCC, Canberra, 1991* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 37–47; Chung Hyun Kyung, “Welcome the Spirit, Hear Her Cries,” *Christianity and Crisis* 51 (July 15, 1991): 219–232.

- ⁸ Kim, "Spirit and 'spirits,'" 350–51. See also "Survival-Syncretist," *Christian Century* 109 (March 11, 1992): 272.
- ⁹ See Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 68.
- ¹⁰ See Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women's Christology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 33–39.
- ¹¹ Austin Flannery, ed., "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)," § 4.34, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations (Vatican II)* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 52.
- ¹² Idem, "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*)," § 1.2, in *Vatican Council II*, 319.
- ¹³ Compare, for example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1976 document, "*Inter Insigniores*" (§ 5) with Pope John Paul II's 1994 apostolic letter, "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*": Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "*Inter Insigniores: Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*" (Vatican City: 1976), accessed July 15, 2010, www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfinsig.htm; Pope John Paul II, "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis: On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone*" (Vatican City: May 22, 1994), accessed July 15, 2010, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, The Catholic Theological Society of America, "Tradition and the Ordination of Women" (Minneapolis: June 6, 1997), accessed July 15, 2010, www.usao.edu/~facshaferi/CTSA1.HTML; see also Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ¹⁵ Susan Sered, "Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa," in Lucinda Joy Peach, *Women and World Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 127–28.
- ¹⁶ Kawahashi Noriko, "Seven Hindrances of Women? A Popular Discourse on Okinawan Women and Religion," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 27, nos. 1–2 (Spring 2000): 85–98, at 86.
- ¹⁷ Monika Wacker, "*Onarigami*: Holy Women in the Twentieth Century," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, nos. 3–4 (Fall 2003): 339–59, at 346.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.
- ¹⁹ Susan Sered, "De-Gendering Religious Leadership: Sociological Discourse in an Okinawan Village," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 3 (1998): 589–611, at 599.
- ²⁰ Wacker, "*Onarigami*," 356.
- ²¹ See Sered, "De-Gendering Religious Leadership."
- ²² Flannery, "Dogmatic Constitution," § 4.35, 52–53.

²³ Chongho Kim, *Korean Shamanism: The Cultural Paradox* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 34–35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Choi Hee An, *Korean Women and God: Experiencing God in a Multi-religious Colonial Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 16–18.

²⁸ Flannery, “Dogmatic Constitution,” § 4.36, 54.

²⁹ Karen Pechilis, “Introduction: Hindu Female Gurus in Historical and Philosophical Context,” in *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States*, ed. Karen Pechilis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁴ For a fuller discussion on women and purity in Indian traditions, see John B. Carman and Frédérique A. Marglin, eds., *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1985).

³⁵ Pechilis, “Introduction,” 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*