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# Narratives of Commitment: Social Activism and Radical Catholic Identity

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NARRATIVES OF COMMITMENT:  
SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND RADICAL CATHOLIC IDENTITY

An Essay in Honor of Nils Holm  
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Sociologists have long theorized about the nature of religious identity – a distinctly two-sided phenomenon. On the one hand, religious identity cannot be reduced to other social sources of group or self-identity. Many religious persons insist that religion itself is a core source of their values, motivations, and commitments; it informs, at the root, their sense of who they are and the meaning of their lives. They define themselves by their connections to churches and sects, or at least by their connection to the gods that those churches and sects worship. On the other hand, religious and social identities influence each other, indeed mutually interpenetrate. For example, one's religion and religiosity may deeply inform one's gender, ethnic, and family identities. The same is true in reverse: gender, ethnicity, and family contribute to religiosity, as H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) noted long ago.

Accordingly, religious self-definitions shift over time, in line with major shifts in social life. One such historical shift has been a change in the relative importance of the individual and individual autonomy in religious themes. The founders of the sociology of religion certainly saw these reciprocal processes. Weber's work on the sociology of Protestantism, for ex-

ample, tracked the interacting transformations of religious and social identity through a period of great upheaval.

Yet, by the latter half of the twentieth century, the sociology of religion seemed to have lost much of Weber's subtlety. The models of religious identity found in most mainstream research before 1980 depict this identity as more or less stable. With few exceptions, they treat the individual as initially socialized in a pattern appropriate to a particular religion. As these models described matters, one learns to be a Catholic, a Presbyterian, or a Quaker through specific institutional training. Accordingly, once established, such an institutionally generated self becomes a solid core from which religiously appropriate behavior, religiously motivated actions, and commitment to the religious group derive. Many religious groups, themselves, still think in this way: Roman Catholics, for example, even use the term "formation" to denote this process of shaping individual religious identity.

These models presume that Catholic identity forms around Church-defined patterns of religiosity, morality, and role-behavior. They see such elements as central parts of how Catholics understand themselves and of how they organize their individual lives. The models allow, at the edges, some diversity in individual ways of being religious; for example, one might choose praying the Psalms over praying the Rosary, or one might participate or not participate in Wednesday night devotionals. They assume, however, that the options open to the individual come from a socially recognizable set, accepted if not encouraged by the official religious institution.

Because these models expect individual religious identity to fit into institutionally defined packages, mainstream research interpreted individual dissatisfaction with Church-defined patterns in the framework of conversion, denomination-switching, or exit altogether. That is, one could change

religions or leave them, but one could not renegotiate the terms of the identity the religion offered. It was, accordingly, inconceivable that individuals might identify themselves as deeply religious Catholics while, at the same time, completely disagreeing with the Church's official definition of what being Catholic means. Church authorities disparaged dissidents' efforts at independent identity-formation as 'cafeteria Catholicism', and treated these efforts as deviations from 'true Catholicism'. The usefulness of these labels to a hierarchy attempting to stem political revolt is obvious. For sociologists, however, this approach is counter-productive, because it blinds us to important changes in the very nature of religious identity.

Such models of institutionally governed religious identity have strongly influenced both the methodology and theory of the social sciences of religion. Survey research on 'religiosity' has typically constructed indices out of institutionally defined criteria such as frequency of church attendance, agreement with elements of church doctrine or moral norms, frequency of private prayer or scripture reading, and so on. Such criteria bias the measurement of religious identity toward the values and behaviors of which the religious institutions approve. Indeed, much research has assumed that individuals' religious identity could be adequately described by simply recording their denominational self-identification. This operationalization of religious identity, too, presupposes a 'standard' denominational religiosity to which individual members conform.

Likewise, our theories of religious socialization, conversion, commitment and exit have started from the assumption that religious identity is a stable, coherent, institutionally defined, socially recognizable package of beliefs, practices, values and priorities, and self-understandings. These theories assume that those who commit, convert, or leave are either

moving toward or falling away from this pre-defined stability. Thus sociologists have questioned converts' and apostates' social and psychological coherence, yet have presumed that coherence to prevail among steady church members. The bias is clear.

The limitations and weaknesses of this way of seeing of religious identity are even more evident when we listen to the narratives of Catholic social activists, the subjects of our research. These activists firmly assert that central to their religious identities is a commitment to confront unjust social institutions, to struggle for peace, to fight the state and church powers-that-be on behalf of the oppressed, the poor, and the voiceless. Clearly, their social activism is as important to their sense of themselves as 'religious' as are church attendance, scripture reading, and moral and doctrinal beliefs are important to the religious self-identities of others. Yet, activism is no mere add-on, no mere secular identity parallel to their religious one. For them, religion and activism are not just intertwined. Their activism is religious, their religion is activist, and both oppose any institutional church that thinks it can govern their religious formation.

These religious narratives force us to rethink the relationship between religious identity and religious institutions. We cannot rescue the old approach merely by adding social activism to our indices of religious involvement. Nor can we treat religious activists as a separate denomination: as 'peace-and-justice Catholics', institutionally and ideologically separable from 'mainstream Catholics' or 'pentecostal Catholics', each with their own institutionally designated styles of religious formation. Instead, we must reshape our theories to take account of the fact that contemporary believers actively construct their religious identities in individual as well as institutionally influenced ways. Many see themselves as highly religious

while simultaneously insisting on their right to define that religiosity and, indeed, to use their definition as a basis for criticizing their religious institutions for promulgating other values and practices. According to the usual model, these persons' dissatisfaction should have led to conversion or leaving; instead, they are challenging the very definitions of Catholic religious identity and the authority of the religious institutions that legitimate them.

In short, we argue that, rather than attempting to doctor the old model of religious identity, sociology should consider entirely new ways of thinking about religious self-identity, commitment, group-identity, and individual religious life-paths. This paper is designed to help our discipline move in that direction.

### Theories of Modern Self-Identity

As far back as Durkheim, sociologists recognized that religion is a key to the relationship between the individual and society-at-large. It can help form this relationship by developing in individuals the world views, moods, and motivations that society needs to continue functioning. Or it can provide evidence of the state of that relationship through its varied symbolization of the individual and the world. Geertz's (1966) famous discussion of religion as a cultural system aptly highlights both these dimensions.

As significant structural shifts in society change the individual-to-society connection, religion changes. This affects the personal as well as the institutional sphere. Social change not only brings new forms of religious associations to the fore; it also alters people's religious identities. Several theorists of late modernity have suggested likely new patterns of religious self-identity that correspond to changes in the structure of modern society. We shall here consider only three: Anthony

Giddens, James Beckford, and Thomas Luckmann. Each of these theorists highlights aspects of modern religious identity that supersede the traditional model outlined above.

Giddens (1991) is the most abstract of the three, if only because he is not concerned with religion *per se*, but sees it as just one of the myriad possible sources of identity in late modern life. In a radical updating of Durkheim's Division of Labor, he proposes that the changed structure of modern social institutions requires a new pattern of self-identity based on greater reflexivity and freedom of choice. Whereas members of traditional societies found their identities through their social roles, which were relatively stable, modern individuals are just that: individuals who must find their own ways and identities in a shifting world. Early modernity opened up the identity-creation process by dissolving the ties that bound people to place, to work and to kin. Late modernity has accelerated these changes. Marriage and family, ethnicity, and other important components of self-identity have become ever more open and malleable. One's gender roles, even one's biological sex, are now matters of individual decision. The consequences for the process of personal identity-formation are immense. Identities are no longer given; they are constructed. This is no less true in the religious sphere.

For Giddens, individual religiosity, in the modern context, is not a given, a stable characteristic, but is an ongoing accomplishment. Specifically, self-identity in pluralistic societies means the relative freedom to choose one's symbols, values, communities of identification, patterns of emotional and bodily expression, and to transform or selectively adapt elements of religious traditions. Self-identity – especially, for our purposes, religious identity – is thus an ongoing project. Individuals vary and transform its content over their lifetimes.

Beckford (1989) focuses more closely on religion, particularly on the way religion becomes a resource for such identity-construction. In his view, religion has become structurally autonomous in late modern societies. This structural "autonomization" (using Simmel's term) results in a different place and function for religion than was previously the case. Beckford suggests that it is more useful to think of religion today as a cultural resource than as a social institution. Religion provides the images, symbols, and meanings from which each individual can reflexively construct an identity. It can proffer a sense of community (albeit not a society-wide monopolistic one) in which those meanings are articulated, supported, experientially confirmed, transformed, and expressed. As we shall see, the notion of religion as a cultural resource is particularly fruitful for highlighting the processes by which social activists express their religious selves – particularly in so far as they find support for these selves from intra-church activist communities rather than from the Church at large.

Luckmann also focuses on religion in late modernity, though in a different way. He sees the individual-to-society connection as key to religion, and proposes that personal identity is a "universal form of individual religiosity" (1967:69-71). Individual religious identity, accordingly, is what connects: 1) social representations (already-constructed world views that individuals internalize), and 2) subjective meanings, values, and motives.

Luckmann notes that, historically, social world views were mediated by official religions, which could articulate coherent, relatively stable, socially supported systems of ultimate meaning for their members. Yet many social-structural changes have undermined – perhaps eliminated – the ability of any official religion to direct the construction of individual identity. Widespread pluralism – the tolerated co-existence of

competing world views within the same society – means that no world view can hold the seemingly objective status of final arbiter for each individual's system of ultimate meaning. Luckmann suggests that the marginalization of official religious organizations, and the concomitant privatization of several spheres of life (e.g., religion, family, leisure activities), have reduced religion and personal identity to a private affair. Thus, each individual has become free to construct an utterly personal identity and an individual system of 'ultimate' significance (Luckmann, 1967:98-99).

In a more recent essay, Luckmann (1990) also suggests that in modern societies, the "great transcendences" of the traditional (religious) world views are less important and effective in linking the individual with society than in former eras. In their place are other important transcendences – experiences by which individuals become conscious of and give meaning to the realities that are greater than or beyond the boundaries of their immediate, materially finite moment of subjective consciousness.

These smaller transcendences do continue to link the individual with sub-communities. Yet, they do so in a less hierarchical way than did the "great transcendences" of times past. Intermediate transcendences focus on family, friendships, chosen communities of identification. "Little transcendences" are yet more individual, often occurring in the context of everyday subjective life. According to Luckmann, many modern religious themes, such as self-expression, personal autonomy, and self-realization, are directed to this level of transcendence. Thus, the location of religion in modern societies has shifted, and the pattern of individual-to-society relationships produced in these smaller-scale transcendences has changed dramatically. Luckmann (1990: 138) states, "the dominant themes in the modern sacred cosmos bestow something like a sacred

status upon the individual himself [sic] by articulating his autonomy.”

Having lost their cultural monopoly and being reduced to the private sphere, even the traditional religions that survive are shared by fewer members of modern society. Luckmann predicts that, while traditional 'official' religious patterns may continue to exist alongside the new in modern society, the emerging form that personal religious identity takes will be comparatively flexible and unstable. Religion will become an eclectic and less coherent assortment of representations (including some traditional 'church' doctrines and images) from which the individual will construct a private system of 'ultimate' significance. Lacking the firm support of objective social institutions, these individual identities will be more precarious and unstable. Yet their very flexibility makes them more suitable for maintaining the individual-to-society links that church religions can no longer sustain.

For all three of these theorists, the flexible quality of modern patterns of religious identity means that individuals can be less rigid, less passive, and more creatively involved in making religion relevant to their personal, everyday lives. All three argue that in late modernity, individual religiosity – even for those who are members of established religions – is more eclectic, more of a bricolage constructed from a wide range of culturally available options than in pre-modern or early modern times. For all three, religious identity is no longer something given. It is now an ongoing accomplishment.

But what does this look like in practice? For data, we turn to some life-story interviews with Catholic social activists. We argue that these religious narratives illustrate the individualized processes of religious identity-construction that Giddens, Beckford, and Luckmann predict for late modernity. They also disconfirm the traditional sociological model of religious iden-

tity, with its preference for top-down identity-formation. Where the old model would see these activists as religiously marginal, the new model interprets their religiosity as evidence of late modern self-constructed identities. Their religiosity, we contend, exemplifies the place of religion in the late modern world.

### The Religious Identities of U.S. Catholic Activists

To uncover modern patterns of religious identity, we must listen to people's own stories. As they tell us about themselves, they spin out their identities, enabling us to see how they have turned the pieces of their lives into the narratives out of which they now live. These narratives are more than a recital of events; they organize experience, often in the very telling. Personal stories are how the ongoing construction of self-identity can be shared and, at least partially, understood. Sometimes the giving of a personal account reshapes or replaces an earlier meaning structure. Sometimes the telling of life stories perpetuates and self-certifies older meanings. Often the sharing of a personal narrative mobilizes the teller (and not just the hearer) to new actions – new chapters in the individual's life story (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992). In any event, it is through this window that we can see modern religious identity being formed.

The narratives of U.S. Catholic social activists reveal a complex pattern of religious identity. This paper is based on a detailed analysis of interviews with 14 activist Catholics, part of a sample of over 50 religiously oriented social activists interviewed during the 1990s. All were committed activists with at least ten years of activist experience at the time of the interviews. Several had been politically active for more than two decades. All worked in California. Ten of the 14 were part of a Los Angeles peace-and-justice network that includes progres-

sives of all religious stripes; all knew each other. The other four worked in the Monterey Bay region of northern California; they were similarly acquainted.

These activists had varied organizational ties. Seven were active nuns or priests, and thus somewhat under the authority of the Catholic hierarchy. Of these, the nuns had more independence and worked in smaller, more activist-oriented organizations – often ones that they had founded. The three priests had parishes or chaplaincies, which in two cases were activist in nature. The third pursued his activism on the side. Three lay people (including two ex-nuns) belonged to unofficial lay religious communities: two to the Los Angeles Catholic Worker and one to the Immaculate Heart Community. Another former nun and her ex-priest husband ran a small charitable foundation supporting Third World self-help projects. The other lay men and women worked for similar organizations.

The open-ended interviews focused on these activists’ self-constructed life stories. They were designed to reveal the self-described sources of their activism and the connections that they saw between their activism and their spiritual lives.

While religious activists other than Catholics also exhibit complex, modern patterns of religious identity, this subset of Catholics is particularly interesting because their individual religious autobiographies reflect the profound structural changes that the Catholic Church has undergone in the last thirty years. Indeed, those structural changes – or the mere fact of rapid change – appear to have made possible a pattern in which Catholics assert a religious identity as Catholics that is radically divergent from the officially promulgated version of ‘Catholic identity’. This is the first of several themes that emerge from the interviews.

### Catholics in Opposition

These activists firmly identify themselves as Catholics, moreover as “good Catholics.” Not only are they disproportionately drawn from the ranks of current or former clergy and religious orders, but nearly all have also been committed Catholics from an early age. Despite a vigorous alienation from the institutional Church, they consider themselves Catholics still. “I think it would be easier to change the color of my eyes or to get a new genetic code than it would be to stop being a Roman Catholic,” said one lay woman activist. “It’s my church, darn it, and they’re not going to take it away from me,” said an ex-nun. Comments like “It’s going to have to leave me because I’m not going anywhere,” “We aren’t interested in starting our own church; Protestants tried that and they haven’t done a hell of a lot better,” abound. Interestingly, only one of the four activists just quoted attends regular Mass. Nor do nearly half of the Catholics interviewed. Many conduct their own services with friends and family. Some of these services are marginally orthodox, others are considerably less so. Yet, all these activists consider themselves Catholic to the core.

Most, however, are not satisfied Catholics – at least, they are not the happy, obedient Catholics whom they imagine that the church hierarchy and the Vatican want. One woman, working full-time in a peace-and-justice center, put it somewhat mildly:

I have to say that, in a public sense as well as a private sense – I grouse a lot about it, but I’d say – yes, I’m a Roman Catholic, comma, damn it! And worse yet, I’m a Roman Catholic woman. And so I think that will be for me what I will continue to identify myself as being – for all the good of it, for all the bad of it, and all the stuff in between.

Most of the interviewees are not willing to leave the definition of what makes a 'good Catholic' to the institution. As one of the ex-nuns put it:

Somebody recently asked, "Do you still consider yourself part of the church?" And I said, "Why certainly I do." – but in a much broader sense of the church, not restricted by a lot of the boundaries and the tightness of orthodoxy and theology, as I have seen it.

A current nun and peace-and-justice worker said more forcefully:

I see many cases in which the Roman Catholic Church is no longer faithful to the tradition. People sometimes ask me "Why do you stay?" Well, I believe that culturally and to the very core of my being, I'm Catholic and I do believe that there are members of the Catholic Church beyond the hierarchy who are capable of being even more faithful than they [the hierarchy] are.

This hostility to church authorities is typical. One of the priests was particularly virulent. He spoke with some force about how he "left the Church" nearly 20 years ago. "I left the Church, [but] not the priesthood," he said. He now pays little attention to the hierarchy, though he is still a priest and still in their employ. Instead, he ministers the sacraments and mysteries to the poor of Los Angeles, whom he feels called to serve. His comment that "I don't move very well with the Catholic Church," was echoed by many, as was a devout ex-priest's comment that he "is not totally connected to [institutional] Catholicism."

Repeatedly, these peace-and-justice activists spoke of their opposition to the institutional Church, their sense of betrayal at its hypocrisy, their wish that it would get its own house in order. In the words of one nun:

To be quite honest, there's very little that the institution [Catholic Church] is capable of holding its head up on today. And yet the principles out of which it speaks, and the positions that it takes on most issues are fairly sound positions. But it falls down in practice.

Such comments are common: Why can't Rome and the bishops practice what they preach?

It is not merely a failure to practice that bothers these activists; it is the Church's active hindrance of its own message. The activists at one peace-and-justice center all spoke of how the hierarchy had blocked their work simply because they were women – and thus "not worth" the bishop's resources. Fumed one:

We had a full working group, and then the archbishop dissolved it and appointed a half-time priest to run all the diocesan peace-and-justice work. And he doesn't do anything, because his other job takes all his time.

Most of these activists have no faith that their leaders will live up to the Church's social stands. As one woman put it:

[Resistance] comes much harder in terms of the Church ... Because more and more, the real hard line retrogressive position that Rome has taken is trying to reduce some of the autonomy of religious communities. And for those of us who are lay people ... all we have is our community in terms of our protection for our autonomy, our freedom to be the prophetic people we want to be.

### Choices and Turning Points

These quotations just barely convey the anger many of these activists feel – much of which comes from negative institutional experiences. These experiences were often sparks for an activist commitment. A former nun was radicalized when her

archbishop suppressed her order, against both the directives of Vatican II and of Canon Law. Consequently, she and her former sisters set up a lay order to do the work they wanted to do. A former priest got tired of all the back-room politics needed to get anything done, so he left the priesthood to run a small foundation that models an integrated spiritual and political life.

This theme emerges repeatedly: for about half of these activists, a personal struggle with the institutional Church changed their outlook, not just about the Church but about the world as a whole. Several described their previous approach as oriented to "charity": giving things to the poor and less fortunate. After experiencing their own institutional powerlessness, they became oriented to "justice." As one nun defined it, "justice is how persons live a life that is consistent with dignity as human beings." She did not see it in the way Vatican delegates treated members of her order; she did not see it in the way that Brazilian society (where she once lived) treats its poor; "and I think right now, in our own society, we don't see [it] happening." These three injustices are connected, in her mind.

The distinction between "charity" and "justice", of course, was one of the theological changes connected to Vatican II. It is also a key teaching of liberation theology. Vatican II as an event deserves special mention here, because it arose often in these activist's self-descriptions. Nearly all saw it as a great divide, not only in the life of the Church but in their personal activism. Only two of these activists were politically aware from an early age. Few undertook anti-war work during the Vietnam era. Most described their upbringing as "traditional", at best as "service-oriented". Their religious identity was strong, their activist identity was weak or non-existent. Like many Americans, they placed these identities in opposition. The political activists they knew were like the friends one of them now has in the Democratic Socialists of America: "I

just find that they write me off ... 'Gee, \_\_\_\_\_ is so smart and she's so committed. [But] she's still hanging onto that stupid stuff called religion.'" And because they were deeply religious, they did not pursue explicitly political work.

Vatican II was a wake-up call. Those activists who mentioned it – and most did – spoke of how it helped them see the spiritual and the political as intricately joined. Said one:

If I didn't have religious faith, I don't know whether I'd care much about social justice. 'God acts in the world' is part of the way I see the world. And God acts mainly in it through us. We are co-creators with God of the world, [and] we live the responsibility with God to make it a better world.

Another said that when younger she did not see much of a connection between Catholicism and political organizing. Yet now she "can't separate faith from healing the world." Her growing political awareness forced her to leave a charismatic lay community in which she felt spiritually fulfilled – except for its authoritarianism. Now she says:

For Christianity to save itself in twentieth century North America, it's got to stand up and say that we don't buy separations anymore. [Not between] men and women, blacks and whites, between Nicaraguans and some Americans, between Russians and Americans.

Before Vatican II, in the minds of many of these activists, the Church supported such separations in its uncritical support of American society. After Vatican II, most believe that such support can only be sustained by hypocrisy.

The Vietnam War was, of course, a watershed for a few. One man even saw his activism pre-dating his religious commitment. He had been a draft resister, and, through a peace conference, met Catholic anti-war activists who had been involved in a draft board raid. He said:

I was very impressed that these people had gone in and poured blood on draft files, and I thought that was the most radical thing I had ever heard of. And coming from Christians (who I didn't think of as very radical), particularly Catholics (who I thought of as even less radical), this was revelatory. Then, in addition to that, they were supporting a soup kitchen and a house of hospitality [for homeless people]. ... It was a kind of revelatory moment for me, that the works of mercy had something to do with a kind of radical political perspective.

Raised Catholic, he had previously accepted the Church's definition of Catholic possibilities. The Catholic social activists he met opened up a new realm, from which grew his 30-year commitment to the Catholic Worker movement.

A further watershed for many of these activists was the U.S. support of a terrorist government in El Salvador. Asked about the source of his activism, one said:

Ronald Reagan was probably responsible. Things got to a point where we were just really depressed and exasperated and everything, and I wanted to do something in the area of Central America because what they were doing seemed so unconscionable.

Though he plays down their contribution, he and his wife were major movers in the church-centered drive for refugee sanctuary in their part of California. Similarly, a nun traces her current activism to these years. The murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Romero and of four North American churchwomen galvanized her already developing commitment.

#### Eclectic Transformations

Though these stories tell of turning points, of new ways of looking at religious commitments and meanings, very few are structured like conversion narratives. Where the latter often describe a life path that rejects what came before – “I once was

blind, but now I see” – these Catholic activists presented pictures of selves that transform their past while continuing it. Their retelling of life's turning points emphasized their realization that they had many options, and that they could and should exercise choice in all areas of personal identity. Given their negative image of a hierarchical Church, which they saw as stifling such choice, this may be enough contrast for rhetorical effectiveness. Yet, something central is different. Although many respondents described themselves as trying to speak and live truly, they did not assert that only they possessed the Truth. It is as though they were trying to combine the openness of the role of seeker with the fervent stance of the committed believer. Several used the image of a journey, as if to say: Here is where I am now; I've changed, but I accept where I used to be as okay; Now I'm building on all that, and tomorrow somewhere else might be where I should be, and I'll change more. As one woman remarked about a major shift in her work, community, and social roles, “It was just a moving on.”

Often, too, these changes included openness to religious elements not traditionally part of Catholic belief or practice. Several respondents had borrowed elements of Asian religions, such as Zen meditation, Tai Chi, and Yoga. A few incorporated elements of New Age religions, and related psychological, ecological, feminist, or transpersonal vocabularies for interpreting their experiences. Some, like the following peace-and-justice worker, described combining such elements into their religiosity consciously:

So I really set aside exclusive Roman Catholicism. ... I remained a religious woman and I have never stopped thinking of myself as a religious woman, ever, not for a moment. But I began to weave in understandings of a variety of different religious and ... spiritual traditions, and ... ways of behaving in the world – concrete actions. So the traditions that I looked most closely at were Native [American] traditions, the Jewish

tradition – and I (because of intermarrying in my family) have a number of men and women who came out of a Jewish faith tradition – and Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

This is the same woman whom we quoted above saying: "I think it would be easier to change the color of my eyes or to get a new genetic code than it would be to stop being a Roman Catholic." She has clearly taken control of her religious self-definition. She allows no Church hierarchy to tell her how to live her Catholicism, but fashions it as she feels the spirit leads. In this, she is typical of the interviewees.

#### Witness from the Margins

As noted above, though these activists see themselves as firm Catholics, they do not see themselves in the mainstream of the Church. Two recurring images underline this self-understanding: a sense of being "prophetic witnesses", and a sense of institutional marginality.

Several activists spoke of their "witness" to the world, or of the need for the Church to embody a "prophetic vision." For them, the task of religious activism is to speak for God in the world, to call that world to account. The Church is heir to the prophets, among whom Jesus was the foremost. For these activists, the Church should proclaim the gospel – not so much to reinforce the beliefs of its members or to gain converts, but to re-form the world at large. It should call that world to stand with the weakest of the weak, to aid the poor, to give shelter to the homeless, to succor the dying. Most importantly, it should call the world to change the social systems that keep people weak, poor, and homeless, and that bring people sickness, violence and death. As the director of a peace-and-justice center put it:

The prophet speaks truth to power. And the prophet is willing to take an unpopular stand because it is truthful, and to work out of that position, no matter what that means. So, if it costs something, whatever the cost, the ... striving for justice outweighs that, and [the prophetic stance] believes it has to be done. [So when we are prophetic, we challenge] civil or ecclesiastical authority – I think everybody here on staff, one time or another [has] engaged in civil resistance.

To these activists, prophetic witness is a religious act, but it is not parochial. The justice these activists call for is universal justice: the right of all people to live in human dignity.

Being prophetic has its risks. As one activist noted, none of the Biblical prophets had easy lives. Proclaiming solidarity with the poor can get you nailed to a cross. Those activists who used this imagery interpreted their own trials in this way. They saw themselves as the prophets, and mainstream society as the Jerusalem and Rome against which those prophets struggled. They, too, knew they could be crushed for opposing the powers that be.

A second and related recurring image is "marginality." Not surprisingly for people so opposed to the Catholic hierarchy, many of these activists see themselves as marginal to established Catholicism. Yet, they do not think this is bad. As a long-time member of the Catholic Worker put it,

We believe that ... it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the Holy Spirit to penetrate institutional structures. So, that's the reason why the Holy Spirit is always on the margins of the Church. And the Church is transformed and kept alive by marginal communities, by communities that leave the institution or exist on the margins of the institutions and try to be held to these standards of the gospel, or at least are moved by those standards.

Other activists also identified with the marginality of Jesus and of ancient Catholic martyrs. They selected role models, such as St. Francis, who exemplified a choice for God over both the institutional Church and the ways of the world. For these activists, opposition to the institutional Church makes one a better Catholic than does obedience to the hierarchy. By staying on the margins, they say, one can better follow God. This image is particularly useful for people trying to forge an identity against massive institutional inertia.

### Community

The most commonly used symbol among these activists, however, is "community." Though these activists see themselves as marginal to the Church at large, almost all see themselves as part of a supportive network of people involved in peace-and-justice work, or connected to a wider – even global – community of social concern and commitment. Each reports feeling supported by such ties. Most also mention this aspect of their lives as the most fulfilling.

Not that every activist gets along with his or her co-workers. As one nun put it, "You couldn't just give me a phone book of [the order] and pick out" names randomly. "But I can pick enough out of that group that I know we're going in the same direction and they can do some discerning for me." She also noted that "I can't think of my religious side apart from the people with whom I'm interconnected." Her connection to her order keeps both her faith and her activism going.

For some, a transformed religious community was crucial in the choice of an activist path. A former nun recalled:

So, all of a sudden, it was like all this new vision of church and reality was exploding out upon me [at a center in California where she was for the first time working with farm workers, peace activists, and Latinos]. ... Post Vatican II. And the

community [her religious order] there was kind of starting to break open. ... It was kind of a euphoric time. ... The symbol for me at the time was "born free." Remember that great old song, "born free, as free as the wind blows?" There was a big poster of a little child on the seashore with her arms wide open. So that was an inner symbol that I really took on around '65 or '66 – the "born free" symbol. And I began to get in touch with a lot of talents like that.

Several activists were ardent about the importance of community in their vision of a just world. The nun whose order became a lay community as a response to an oppressive archbishop contrasted the institutional Church with the religious community of which she is now a part. The latter sustains her; the former oppresses her so much that she cannot bear to attend its services. Though mostly still Catholic and female, her community now includes some Protestants and some men – but only those who do not feel compelled to run everything. For her, such ecumenical feminist communities serve as models of dignified social relations – the kind of ties between people so lacking in an oppressive world.

The ideal community for these activists is not only a community of work, but also a community of worship. One lay activist described how her parish had been such a community, until its sympathetic priest was transferred. "We had community meetings where everybody made decisions by consensus," she said.

And everything was open. Arguing and making up and exchanging views. But we had the whole body. ... The liturgies were very exciting and warm and involving. A lot of creative ideas.

[Then] we had a change in pastors, [and it] knocked the whole structure down. ... It defies the ability of people to grow up in the Church. Because they're never in a position to make a de-

cision that can't be overturned by a Bishop or a Priest or someone else. They're always children to 'father'.

Similarly, the women at a regional justice center have prayer services together, which they find very spiritually nourishing. As one put it

What we do when we pray together is the same model that we do [for] everything else. We pray together collaboratively. We have experience, we reflect on it socially, ... and on most days we are given to do an action around that.

I haven't been to Mass in a long time. There's a longing in me ... the memory of how good it felt to have the sensuousness of church. But then I get very angered because I immediately remember what the priest sounded like, and these damn, excuse me, male homilies that had absolutely nothing to do with experience. ... [So] I choose to pray with women. And I choose to pray collaboratively. I choose to pray toward action. That's how my community's set up.

Though more eloquent than most, this activist expresses a common sentiment. Her emphasis on choice reflects these interviewees' conviction that they have a right to choose their religion, not just in its broad outlines but in its details. Indeed, they believe that unless people choose their own religious paths, they are not being faithful to God. Their God does not want people to follow blindly. "S/he (the Great Father/Mother)" wants them to be true to themselves. Communities help support this discernment, and are thus crucial to a true spiritual life.

This sense of community was particularly telling for the women interviewees. Several were members of religious communities, who often described their community as a 'home base' of support. Wider connections grow naturally out of this home. As one of them put it:

I guess for me, my religious life is really based in community – my religious community, the global community, all the other sub-communities that I find myself part of. And I think it's really important how we structure them. How we are together. Whenever we come together as a staff [at the peace-and-justice center], we really spend a good amount of time doing some faith sharing. Trying to be relational.

This woman, like many others, explicitly contrasted her relational model of community with the "patriarchal" model of the institutional Church. She said that community governs itself by consensual decision-making; patriarchy delivers orders from on high. The former cares about each individual; the latter subordinates people to tasks. These women not only appropriate feminism to criticize their patriarchal Church; they rethink and reform their community life on feminist principles.

The relationalism of community life flows into other areas, particularly in the images these activists use to describe their work. One woman said, in response to a question about the basis of her activist commitments:

I think it has to do with my core identity ... as it – and here's the key – as it related to the other. Whether it's the other human being or the other in terms of understanding my connection with life or whether it's other in terms of connecting [to what] I understand [as] the life source...

This is far from a rule-based ethic, which deduces action from dogma or fixed principles (see Spickard 1998, pp 175ff). For many of these activists, social action grows out of a sense of connection with others, a sense that Jesus would have them stand with His community – the poor and the downtrodden. They think that the Church has lost touch with this community. Many see their work as one way to bring Christians into right relation with it again.

### Forging Religious Identity

What are we to make of this material? Clearly, it does not support the old sociological model, which treated religious identity as something given, defined by conformity to church doctrine and practices. These Catholic social activists are deeply religious and are deeply committed to their vision of the religious life. Yet they neither buy the model of Catholicism that the hierarchy markets nor have they switched to another pre-fabricated identity, religious or otherwise. They have forged religious selves in concert with but not simply at the behest of their fellow activists.

We can pick out several elements of this identity-creation process. It is clearly individualist: these activists see themselves as spiritual travelers, whose journeys their Church influences but does not dictate. It is just as clearly eclectic: each builds his or her spiritual path out of disparate elements, some quite orthodox but others clearly not so. Yet each justifies his or her individualism and eclecticism from within the Catholic tradition, and makes a good case for their catholicity. Hierarchical opposition, they claim, stems from the leadership's un-Catholic authoritarianism, not from their own deviation.

Politics matter a great deal to these activists. They are not both religious and political, as if these were separable (as they are to most Americans). Instead, their political work grows directly from their faith commitment, unified into one coherent spiritual leading. They accomplish this unification by redefining both religion and politics, and by refusing to conform to standardly accepted behavior in either realm. Thus they belittle both bishops and politicians – indeed, they belittle bishops as politicians – because both compromise their principles in the face of evil. These activists do not readily compromise principles, and they have proved themselves willing to sacrifice much to improve the world. Their adherence to prin-

ciple becomes a central part of their self-identity, as does their opposition to authority. For example, members of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker frequently introduce visitors by listing some of their arrests in peace demonstrations. Opposition to the status quo helps them define who they are.

As noted, that opposition includes opposition to their own Church hierarchy. But rather than leave the church, as the older models of religious identity would have predicted, these activists agitate from within. They see themselves as the true faithful, the remnant, carrying out the mission that the Church has forgotten, yet doing so with the backing of Church tradition. They think their church has strayed, but is, like the rest of the world, redeemable. Until that redemption, they see themselves as carrying on the work it is supposed to do.

That work is disparate. Some of these activists work within Church-sponsored institutions, others work in secular society, while still others have formed their own associations. While all would recognize each other as fellow travelers, they do not all agree politically, and would not all equally value the work the others do. They see themselves as part of specific communities, even as part of a 'peace-and-justice community' that includes all those working for similar ends. Yet, their own paths are never subordinated to their communities, neither the narrower nor the wider. Communities help these people discover who they are, but they do not dictate their identities. As they move forward on their own personal paths, they may move from one community to another – or to none at all.

This, perhaps, explains the lack of traditional conversion language in these activists' narratives. A conversion narrative of the 'I once was lost but now am found' variety requires an individual to reject the past and embrace the present – and to assume that the present will continue unchanged into the future. The activists interviewed neither reject their pasts nor do

they assume the fixity of their presents. Instead, they see themselves on individual journeys, during which their identities may transform and change. They have faith that God leads them, and they hope that they can always follow His/Her call. They are convinced that this call will lead them to works of charity, but also to works of justice. Of the way-stations on this path, and of the particular nature of those works, they cannot predict much. Yet they believe that God must lead them from inside, not from outside. They must decide for themselves, not at the behest of their institutions. Otherwise, they do not believe they can respond with the integrity God demands.

These beliefs, met repeatedly in the interviews, correspond well to the view of late-modern religious identity construction that can be gleaned from Giddens, Beckford, and Luckmann. Identity in late-modernity is individualistic, eclectic, personal, fluid, and an on-going accomplishment. Religion is no longer a source of pre-fabricated identities, but is a cultural resource out of which individuals must forge a sense of who they are. The "great transcendences" of former ages, which united societies through shared religious worldviews, have given way to smaller transcendences that link individuals with sub-communities, yet in ways that individuals at least partially choose.

These Catholic activists are at once individualistic and Catholic, self-made and rooted in a centuries-long tradition. Sociologists of religion can no longer assume that religious identities are simply handed down to passive “believers.” Instead, individuals form their own identities, as they use religious resources to make sense of themselves and the world.

## NOTES

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