

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION ON CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

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| Topic:      | Rethinking Conversion through Gender and Interreligious<br>Difference/Dialogue  |
| Conveners:  | Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College<br>Paulette Skiba, Clarke University      |
| Moderator:  | Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College   |
| Presenters: | Karen Enriquez, Xavier University<br>Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University |
| Respondent: | Michele Saracino, Manhattan College   |

The Women's Consultation sponsored a session aligned with the convention's theme of Conversion. In the first paper, titled "Conversion as Finding the Empowered and Interconnected Self through Spiritual Practices: A Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," Karen Enriquez explored how spiritual practices evoke personal and social transformation, and how interreligious dialogue acts as a vehicle of personal and social conversion. In other words, spiritual practice is inextricably intertwined with social action as a result of conversion to new ways of understanding and living. Engaging in a dialogue between Christian and Buddhist spirituality represented in the writings of Sarah Coakley and Rita Gross, Enriquez argued for the role of spiritual practices in the conversion to a relational anthropology and to its associated prophetic practices of solidarity. Among these spiritual practices, Enriquez, following Coakley, includes prayer as power-in-vulnerability, which theologically—or better kenotically—creates a more empowered self in relation to the divine and cultivates a more receptive, connective self in relation to all reality. Kenotically-inspired prayer as making space for the Other/other, whether the divine or non/human, enables a turn—a conversion—to our own and others' brokenness, and thus inspires personal and social healing. Following Gross, Enriquez also incorporates meditation among these spiritual practices, based on the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of *sunyata* or the shared empty nature of all reality. Mindfulness of emptiness through meditation increases self-awareness and acceptance, which undermines patriarchal limits on women and likewise encourages equanimity, which Enriquez described as ever-widening circles of compassion for the shared suffering of all beings. Personal conversion, then, presages social conversion.

In the second paper, titled "Friendship and Survival: The Meanings of Conversion in Early 20th Century China," Jeannine Hill Fletcher critically reexamined Catholic theologies of religious difference predicated on an absolutist, exclusionary soteriology. Using original research from the Maryknoll Sisters' archives, Hill Fletcher probed diverse meanings of conversion from the perspectives of pre-Vatican II Catholic teaching, the Sisters' experiences in this apostolate of friendliness, and the witness of Chinese women in the early 20th century. The stories of American Catholic and Chinese Confucian women in the missions problematized the conventional portrait of conversion not only in terms of beliefs, but also in terms of practices: economic, material, social, familial, and religious. For example, the Sisters' mission practices were deeply embedded in the daily lives of Chinese women who resisted conversion based on their families' economic needs and material well-being, who welcomed conversion as a means to level otherwise hierarchical social

and gender relations in a Confucian-based family and society, and who embraced spiritual commitments to both Christian and Asian traditions. As Hill Fletcher interpreted these stories, the Sisters aimed to convert the other but were converted to the other. The Sisters considered these women's multi-relational perspectives, which affected their conversion, and thus broadened their understandings of what is salvific in terms of what is life-giving. Moreover, Hill Fletcher drew insights from these Chinese women's reasoning into and out of Christianity for women's religious affiliation—or not—with the Church today. Hill Fletcher concluded, "Standing very close to th[ese women], the feminist theologian, too, may reason that the practices of this Church do not provide for the fullness of life."

In her response, Michele Saracino observed that the Sisters in Hill Fletcher's research were transformed by the Chinese women's stories, and then pointed to Hill Fletcher's unsettling call to deconversion as an expression of solidarity with those stories. Subsequently, Saracino queried whether our relationships with the religious other necessarily undo us and our religious belonging. Enriquez's paper, in Saracino's view, addressed this question by validating the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism and by elaborating both a comparative method and a relational anthropology which did not relinquish the self for the other. Saracino, however, questioned how Enriquez employed Christian kenosis and Buddhist emptiness to counter women's socialization to sacrifice, as these notions often subvert rather than support women's spiritualities and subjectivities. Finally, she pondered the theological implications of creating a feminist spirituality by living in a liminal space at the nexus of multiple religious traditions.

Prompted by the papers and the response, participants discussed the terms conversion and church in both provocative papers, the histories of religious orders with inculturating Catholicism, women's practices of dual/multiple religious belonging, and women's negotiations with religious institutional roadblocks to the holy, suggesting that survival and quality of life developed in womanist theology might function as theological criteria for such negotiations.

Following the discussion, Paulette Skiba presented the Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award to Mary C. Boys of Union Theological Seminary. John Pawlikowski, Elena Procario-Foley, and Elizabeth Groppe offered congratulatory comments. Approximately 70–75 members attended and participated in the memorial for *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz.

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