

10-5-2015

Review of A. Coco, Catholics, Conflicts, and Choices

Michele M. Dillon

University of New Hampshire, Durham, Michele.Dillon@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/soc_facpub

Recommended Citation

Religion and Gender. 2015. Review of A. Coco, Catholics, Conflicts, and Choices (Acumen, 2013).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

Review of Angela Coco, *Catholics, Conflicts and Choices: An Exploration of Power Relations in the Catholic Church*, Durham, UK: Acumen 2013, vii + 247 pp., ISBN 978-1-84465-651-6

BY MICHELE DILLON, UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, USA

Angela Coco, a senior lecturer in social sciences at Southern Cross University (New South Wales, Australia), approaches her study of Australian, self-identified 'raised' Catholics with a decidedly feminist and activist orientation. From the outset, she highlights her own personal experiences of Catholicism as a 40 year old divorced mother of a young teenage daughter (in 1989) who was prompted by her anger at a visiting priest's sermon condemning divorce to leave the church despite her history of active catechetical involvement in a local progressive parish (p. 5). This experience anchors her study, *Catholics, Conflicts and Choices*, and drives its phenomenological inquiry. The book dissects the findings from probing, in-depth interviews she conducted with 40 individuals, all of whom have personal lives and experiences that came into conflict with some aspect of official church teaching or practice. With a keen attunement to how she herself made sense of her conflicted situation and the choices it presented, her commitment to feminist research anchors her 'involvement as interviewer' and 'contributed to co-created understandings with the research participants' (p. 36) in making sense of their reality-questioning situations. The wide-ranging situations covered in this interesting book derive from interviewees' statuses, for example, as single mothers, separated women or men, gay men, lesbians, and interpersonal violence and abuse victims, or from intra-church roles (e.g., nuns, priests, teachers) where interviewees experienced first-hand stark inconsistencies between church mission and everyday practices.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One provides helpful historical background to Australian Catholicism, one heavily influenced by Irish immigrants and ghettoised, though characterised by liberal leaning activism since the early 1990s (Chapter 1). Coco also introduces the central analytical framework for her study: situation movement states (SMS), i.e., individuals' 'subjective responses to experiences of conflict' (p. 16). 'Each SMS evidences a particular set of cognitive responses, emotional and bodily responses and courses of action', providing 'nuanced descriptions of the ways people feel empowered or powerless in the particular situations they describe' (p. 16). Given this focus, the book's subtitle

can be read as referring both to the institutional power relations in the Church, defined by Coco, following R.W. Connell's theorising, in terms of a gendered regime and masculine culture, as well to how individuals construe and position themselves as agential beings vis-à-vis the Church as institution and community. SMS types – Coco identifies eight from her interview findings: Barrier, Decision, Wash-out, Effete, Problem, Spin-out, Drifting, and Tightrope – basically drive the rest of the book. Chapter 2 presents findings about the interviewees' social background and their Catholic practices and the meanings attached to their Catholicism, and ends with the author's brief application of how five different SMS match the experiences of the interviewees. Chapter 3 alerts readers to the emotions and bodily responses entailed in SMS by focusing in depth on how one woman's experience of full-time motherhood changed her identity; the realities and time rhythms of mothering did not fit with the rhythms of church time, because as Coco argues 'The masculinity of Catholic ideology is encoded in clock time' (p. 49), and thus is not attuned to the tempo of mothering work. Chapter 4 elaborates on how the hierarchy of masculinities in the Church subordinates and disempowers not just women but men too, including another interviewee, Josh, a columnist priest whose writings were unilaterally questioned by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Chapter 4).

Part II more explicitly engages with SMS types – Barrier, Decision, Wash-out, Effete (Chapter 5), Problem, Spin-out (Chapter 6), Drifting, and Tightrope (Chapter 7) – and highlights the intense though varied emotional labour entailed for the interviewees in working through their identity/church-questioning experiences. Coco uses interviewees' experiences to show how aspects of the institutional church structure (e.g., the annulment process) (Chapter 5), social interactions with Catholics they know locally (Chapter 6), and individuals' own internalised self-dialogue (Chapter 7) variously inform how they frame and come to a resolution of their identity/situation conflict. Coco argues that individuals' target focus (e.g., the institution rather than local Catholics) impact their specific experiences of power relations and the courses of action they adopt. The application of SMS to Catholics' identity negotiation is innovative and provides the reader with a close encounter with the everyday nitty-gritty situational details in interviewees' lives. With so many SMS types, however, it can be difficult for a reader to remain attentive to how each type is differentiated conceptually and empirically, and how it matters. For example, Coco notes that 'the most significant aspects of production relations in the Problem situation were the large amounts of emotional and social labour involved in trying to resolve the problem' (p. 147). But it is also apparent that 'Barrier experiences were accompanied by high levels of stress....Three of the women [interviewees] were so stressed that their physical health suffered' (p. 97). Further, several of the interviewees emphasise the anger and other emotions they variously experienced including two in the Wash-out category who experienced the emotional violence of being a victim of abuse (pp. 1201–121). A more parsimonious categorical framework might facilitate a sharper and more compelling analysis of recurring themes and strategies.

Part III (Chapters 8 and 9) returns to the Church as a gendered regime. In this framing, the Church implements and reproduces a hegemonic masculinity wherein 'the Church, meaning the very large proportion of Catholics [men and women, celibate and non-celibate], is in fact a bridal spouse, and that Catholics perform the feminised housework that keeps the household functioning'

(p. 190). In Coco's assessment, the bride is analogous to a 'battered wife who returns to the abusive situation', and whose physical, social, and spiritual validity is nullified by abusive hierarchical power relations (p. 15). Coco argues that the relations of domination in the Church can be illuminated by drawing on Transactional Analysis and its construal of interaction based on the stances of adult, child, or parent. Drawing on the experiences recounted in her interviews, she argues that the Church eschews mature Adult-Adult communication and instead reproduces parent-child relations, thus reproducing authoritarian, hierarchical power through church teachings, narratives, and institutional structures and routines (pp. 193–198). There is thus a communication breakdown (pp. 14, 221), a failure to recognise and listen to the everyday experiences of ordinary Catholics (pp. 58–59) who must nonetheless use this knowledge to negotiate the identity and situational challenges that the Church presents and which in large part keeps the 'Catholic family from fragmenting' (p. 199). The apparent harmony in the church (pp. 210, 213) is built on the split levels of consciousness and commitment among those who are 'faithful' to the Church (p. 135). For the feminist project of institutional change, however, it is precisely the strategies used in the work of 'resistance and compromise' (p. 5), that militate against the transformation of unequal power structures and relations. As Coco concludes, most situation-questioning Catholics who feel compelled to withdraw assent to some level of their Catholic beliefs and practices, nonetheless, do not compromise their Catholic-informed values and relationships (p. 222). Notwithstanding the impediments to institutional transformation, Coco's SMS analysis is an important contribution to feminist scholarship documenting the complicated, differentiated realities of individuals' everyday/everynight experiences. As such, her findings may help readers appreciate why religious institutions face decline if their institutional narratives, including their social doctrines and pastoral guidelines, pay little attention to lived experiences.