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# REVIEW OF AND RESPONSE TO C. WESS DANIELS' *A CONVERGENT MODEL OF RENEWAL*: READING THE CONVERGENT MODEL THROUGH A ROMAN CATHOLIC CASE STUDY

JILL PETERFESO

I begin with a disclaimer: I am not a Quaker Studies scholar, nor am I a theologian. Rather, I am a curious observer of Quaker values and processes who teaches at a Quaker college and who looks for intersections and impasses between and among religious traditions and theological frameworks. I identify myself as a cultural historian of American religions, and my research focuses on gender and sexuality, performative resistance, and social justice, specifically in Roman Catholicism and Mormonism. For the past 8 years, I have conducted ethnographic work on Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP), a group of nearly 200 women who claim to have gotten ordained Catholic priests in spite of Rome's insistence on an all-male priesthood. These womenpriests see themselves as reformers who will save Catholicism even as they disobey the Vatican. They do not aspire to leave the Church altogether—hence the retention of “Roman” in their movement's name. RCWP's women position themselves in opposition to the institutional Church (and specifically Canon 1024, “Only a baptized man can validly receive sacred ordination”<sup>1</sup>) while seeking to reform the Church through priesthood. Through what I interpret as their faith-filled disobedience, RCWP raises questions central to contemporary Catholicism, specifically in the global North: Who is Catholic? What does it mean to be Catholic? Who gets to decide?

With this invitation to review and respond to C. Wess Daniels' 2015 book came the opportunity to investigate how Daniels' convergent model for participatory renewal fits alongside considerations of RCWP. To my surprise, I discovered that my research concerns are not so very far removed from Daniels'. While he talks of renewal, retrieval, revitalization, and reinterpretation, I (and the womenpriests I study) speak of reform, reimagining, restructuring, and reshaping.

Both Daniels and I focus on ways that beleaguered contemporary religious groups who are struggling with identity seek to make changes through innovation and community building. I found myself wondering, What makes “remixing the Quaker Tradition” different from “reimagining Roman Catholicism”? What are the areas of perfect fit, or uncomfortable alliance, or outright disagreement?

One thing is certain: these questions of reform and renewal carry great urgency for their respective traditions. Roman Catholicism is struggling, specifically in the U.S. and Western Europe, in places that have grown increasingly suspicious of “tradition” as sold through “institutions”—places that have been pummeled emotionally and financially by the sex-abuse scandal.<sup>2</sup> Quakerism is having its own troubles: in the Introduction, Daniels tells the reader that “Given the fragmentation and loss of identity, the tradition [of Quakerism in America] is in crisis” (8). To tackle this crisis in Quakerism, Daniels calls upon *apprentices*, who can guide others toward a “remix of the tradition” in spite of contemporary “obstacles” (2).

In what follows, I use the RCWP movement to investigate Daniels’ model for viable contributions beyond Quaker groups. Thinking about circumstances that seem to separate Quaker renewal from Roman Catholic reform, I focus largely on questions of tradition, institutional authority, and power. From my scholarly location, I find most useful Daniels’ schema for understanding changes starting at the grass-roots; I am less convinced that the model translates in cases where hierarchy (or more specifically, patriarchy) makes the rules for a valid religious identity. I have organized my remarks around three key threads I pulled from *A Convergent Model of Renewal*, and I hope my comments can steer us toward interfaith conversations about how-change-happens in contemporary Christianity.

## TRADITION

Apprentices—who are Daniels’ worker bees in resolving the contemporary Quaker crisis—are by necessity in relationship with a religious tradition. He writes, “[T]he way out of this crisis involves apprentices within the tradition retrieving resources within their tradition and reinterpreting them within today’s context” (8). I love his use of the word “apprentice” to describe those committed individuals who agitate faithfully for reform, who are “those who have been steeped in

the narrative and practices of their tradition, and are consequently the ones most affected not only by the demise of their particular movement, but by the problems associated with their context” (8-9).

Because the womenpriests are “apprentices” trying to reform a tradition in crisis, I found immediate solidarity with Daniels’ project. Some additional background on the womenpriest movement may be helpful here: the group started in 2002 on Europe’s Danube River, when seven women were, in their words, ordained “validly but illegally.” Rome disagrees, saying these women are not and cannot, ever, be validly ordained. As reprisal for their *contra legem* (“against canon law”) actions, the womenpriests are all excommunicated.<sup>3</sup> Vatican arguments hold that Jesus wants only male priests, that women cannot image Christ in the priestly role, and that it is as impossible for a woman to be a priest as it is for a man to have a baby. RCWP maintains that Rome is misinterpreting Jesus’s ministry because of misogyny embedded in the Roman Catholic past. In my research, I refer to RCWP’s actions as “transgressive traditions”: I see them as a group that is, to borrow Daniels’ word, “remixing” Roman Catholicism, through what I call active, performative resistance, or (nod to Daniels) “authentic resistance” (113ff), whereby the womenpriests transgressively break some church rules while holding fast to certain traditional elements. RCWP is creating something new using the resources of the old. Illegal ordination and priesthood allow RCWP’s women to attempt to reform a struggling and splintering Roman Catholic Church while preserving their own relationships with Roman Catholicism and their faith in God.

Tradition both helps and hurts the womenpriests’ cause. Whatever they attempt, they *must* navigate tradition. Thinking about Daniels’ model, then, I wonder whether tradition does or does not stand in the way of Quaker renewal. For Quakers, what, if any, traditions must be retained or redeemed to still *be* Quaker? Who and/or what are the gate-keepers of tradition?

For womenpriests, the answer is undeniably straightforward: Rome<sup>4</sup> controls reform—and recent popes have all opposed and refused to discuss women’s ordination. To be clear, womenpriests do not simply want to bring women into hierarchical structures, do not want simply to “add women and stir.” Rather, they want massive changes at the structural level: more lay persons involved in decision-making; an end to clerical celibacy; equality between the sexes. The womenpriests want to keep *some* Catholic traditions but change others. To do anything so

dramatically different that it ceases to be *Roman* Catholicism would mark them as separate from Rome altogether. It would, in RCWP's view, miss the point.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for RCWP as for the Roman Catholic Church, tradition is complex and fraught. Daniels' model appreciates this difficulty; he invokes Alasdair MacIntyre who called tradition "an historically extended, socially embodied argument" (24). Tradition is not binary, not black-and-white: it is a spectrum that, for MacIntyre and Daniels, needs to respond to historical and social circumstances. Through its protests against Canon Law and Rome's arguments from "tradition," RCWP is discovering (and embodying) that tradition lives in people and arises in and from embodied subjects. RCWP argues that tradition is not something decreed from on-high, but rather something negotiated by invested actors, all of whom have different (or non-existent) access to institutional power. Tradition, RCWP says, looks different in different hands.

#### MODERNITY (CONTEXT AND THEOLOGY)

Tradition is not always sexy to the modern (and western) world. Pair this with studies tracking increased numbers of "nones" on individual religiosity surveys, and one might wonder whether "religion" and "faith" will even be recognizable in coming decades. Daniels reframes the matter: "What if it's not that 21st century people (and especially young people) are abandoning faith, but rather are creating it in new and previously unimagined ways. What if they are 'poaching' and 'converging'?" (74). Offering an optimistic response to concerned observers bemoaning the loss of religiosity, Daniels says that today's youth are "poaching": "Poaching challenges the authorized meanings and sanctioned interpretations of particular texts by making way for multiple voices, readings and interpretations." (68) Poaching turns spectator into participant—or passive receptacle into creative agent. Following Stephen Bevans, Daniels contends that all theology is "contextual"—and renewal, too, is contextual(ized). Read through this lens of creativity, context, and modern culture, Daniels puts a positive spin on potentially dire data.

Can Daniels' assessment apply also to 2000-year-old churches, or does it just work for churches that find compelling meanings within the modern world? The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, acknowledges modernity—but sometimes (and selectively) positions itself outside of it. The 1960's Second Vatican Council sought to

situate Catholicism in a contemporary context, and definite changes were made: American liturgies were now to be said in English, and not in Latin; Catholics could eat meat on non-Lenten Fridays; lay people were to take a more active part in the mass, singing and assisting at the altar. A new day was dawning in Roman Catholicism—to a point. In 1976, the Church’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued *Inter Insigniores*, or the “Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood.” The document did acknowledge changes happening in the modern world (such as the feminist movement and the ordination of women in Protestant circles) *but* made clear that Church tradition and Christ’s will were not subject to the ebbing and flowing of modern times.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the CDF said, contemporary context means nothing on this issue. “Modernity” could not offer reasons to change tradition.

On a related point, Daniels’ observations about “remixing” and youthful energy makes me wonder if there is a generational divide that needs further examination? To be sure, although they are challenging authorized meanings and making way for new authoritative voices, RCWP’s women are not youthful: most were born in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. They seek reform through priesthood because, as they argue, they have long heard a call to ordination and want to answer that call while they still can. How do older generations “remix” and “poach”?

What can reform-minded Christians do, then, within religious groups that don’t like the “contextual” in “contextual theology”? Churches like Roman Catholicism have argued that there are some sacred things that cannot be touched by historical shifts. Do some Christians not get to aspire to a convergent model of renewal, because of institutional refusal couched as reverence to a tradition?

## CHANGE, WITHIN AND WITHOUT AN INSTITUTION

For Catholics, official change happens through the institutional Church. RCWP can reimagine, reform, and reframe all they want—but without Vatican approval, the womenpriests are easily dismissed as heretics, schismatics, and “not Catholic.” *A Convergent Model of Renewal* does not address the challenges of navigating an institutional monolith like the Roman Catholic Church. I wonder whether the lack of an equivalent Quaker establishment, either to preclude or persuade reform, prevents Daniels’ convergent model from applying broadly to all Christian renewal efforts. While it seems the Quakers

Daniels describes are, like RCWP, struggling against one another and against competing ideas of identity and values, RCWP's women must additionally contend with the institutional Church. Part of RCWP's reform efforts must involve forging a new relationship with the institution.

While Daniels does not deal directly with institutional challenges, I have found valuable his use of cyber-theory and collective intelligence (71ff) when it comes to thinking through RCWP's relationship with Rome in light of modernity, theology, and reform. I see RCWP as modifying the familiar relationships in Roman Catholicism: in womenpriests' hands, Catholicism is located not institutionally, but rather in sacrament, ritual, practice, and lived experience. Perhaps Roman Catholicism is not just located "institutionally—in brick-and-mortar or Roman archives or the authority of male prelates—but in something more like "the Cloud"—existing everywhere, able to be uploaded to and downloaded from, as the need fits. The Cloud allows us to take data anywhere and use it any time. It permits wide sharing of information—instead of everything being in one place alone.<sup>7</sup> RCWP might signify this movement away from physical, tangible, rule-bound "stuff" in Roman Catholicism, while instead capturing a Roman Catholic essence, whereby what is important is found elsewhere—not in the institution, but in those religious items people wish to upload, download, and disseminate.

The implications of this (for RCWP and Catholic Studies) are huge, but for the purposes of reflection on Daniels' book, the important issue is *how* womenpriests are constructing this extra-institutional community: through "authentic resistance." Womenpriests come to embody a type of 21st century Roman Catholicism that is both *outside* the institution (in terms of being excommunicated and disagreeing with Rome on issues like women's ordination, clerical celibacy, homosexuality, and communion for divorced Catholics) and *within* the institution (in terms of their self-understanding as "Roman" and continuing Catholic sacramental, liturgical, and scriptural traditions). The womenpriests have then replicated Daniels' predications about decentralized authority and alternative social communities.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I have pointed to the many ways Daniels' renewal model alights with upon my own ethnographic, lived-religions project that focuses



on RCWP. My womenpriests are “remixing” the Roman Catholic tradition; resisting certain traditional norms (such as a male-only priesthood) by embodying priesthood in a female body; striving for collective intelligence within their newly formed worship communities, as they try to break down the lay-clergy divide to characterize so much Catholic history; and forming alternative communities (of progressively-minded women, of sympathetic Catholics) where they continue to nurture and grow their ideal Roman Catholicism.

These similarities are valuable indeed for future academic conversations and activist strategies, but perhaps the differences are even more valuable. Daniels writes—and RCWP would wholly agree—that “The best hope for the revitalization of any faith tradition is to draw on the resources of its tradition” (102). This is a key starting point. But drawing upon a tradition’s resources cannot guarantee reform. For RCWP, the closer they stay to the tradition, the more dangerous (and “schismatic”) they become. The institution tells them they do not have the right to reform the church. RCWP cannot walk away and form a new Catholic sect; they are desperate to remain Roman Catholic because they believe themselves to be deeply, wholly Roman Catholic. While they want to change the Church *as* Catholics, the institutional Church readily responds: you are not real Catholics; you are excommunicated; you are wrong.

Daniels writes that reform and renewal are built into Quakerism’s DNA. What of religious groups who do *not* have easy access to such DNA? Of course, Roman Catholicism changes—but slowly, and on Vatican terms. RCWP’s women see Jesus as a change-maker in his own first-century Jewish, Palestinian context, and womenpriests seek to emulate and preach the Jesus they find in the gospels. But even Jesus himself cannot be interpreted without guidance from Rome’s deposit of faith: Rome views RCWP’s interpretations of Jesus as being dangerously misapplied on the subject of women’s ordination.

The faith tradition that RCWP wants fervidly to be part of, to preserve, and to change has drawn strict doctrinal boundaries, and the institution believes it has the right to determine who is “in” and who is “out.” In contrast, RCWP wants to put the Roman Catholic identity in the hands, hearts, and souls of individuals, while using the “downloaded” traditional elements it most values. Can RCWP still be Roman Catholic, then? Or has RCWP “renewed” and “reformed” itself out of a possible relationship with Roman Catholicism? What dangers befall committed believers when they find they are no longer



welcomed in the religious system they sought to change—especially when the whole point was to remain “Roman Catholic” all along?

The point is this: reform carries real risks. And for groups bound by tradition and institutional authority, those risks are *powerful*: powerful deterrents to renewal efforts, or powerful measures threats to one’s religious identity, or powerful forces that remove someone from a Church that purports to hold the keys to salvation. RCWP’s women repeatedly hear that they have put their eternal souls in danger through their disobedient act. Is eternal damnation a fair price to pay for attempted renewal?

These are the matters upon which I hope Daniels might offer additional, sustained reflection. Can Daniels’ convergent model propose even more parallels for scholars (of strong institutional, patriarchal religions) like myself, and even more optimistic sustenance for groups (of faith-filled dissenters) like RCWP? When confronted with *power* as it applies to tradition, institutions, and (if we may get so esoteric) one’s immortal soul, how does the convergent model respond? Surely, it is perhaps not desirable for any one renewal model to speak to all Christian reformers. But if not, how so? What conditions (and contexts) are needed for the convergent model to succeed? Can the convergent model work for “alternative participating communities” who seek not to be “alternative” but to *alter* the existing group?

As a final note: if I have not made sufficiently clear my appreciation for Daniels’ scholarship or my admiration for its undeniable value both “on the ground” and in academic discourse, let me pause to voice this praise. He is offering an invaluable way to rethink renewal and reform in a 21st century religious context crying out for new methods and updated messages. If anything, it is his optimism in the face of obstacles that makes me long to hear his prophetic perspective on movements within my own line of vision.

## ENDNOTES

1. Canon Law Society of America, *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, eds. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.
2. Catholics who long for dramatic church reforms are especially fond of repeating the statistic that *former* Catholics are now the United States’ *second* largest group, with 1 in 10 U.S. Catholic adults leaving the church. Tom Roberts, “The ‘had it’ Catholics,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 11, 2010, <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/had-it-catholics>. Roberts writes, “The adult population of the United States was

228.1 million in 2008. So if one in 10 U.S. adults were former Catholics, that 22.8 million would make ex-Catholics, if one considered them a denomination, the second largest in the country behind Catholics, who list 68.1 million members, according to the National Council of Churches' 2010 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches. The ex-Catholics would far outnumber the next largest denomination, Southern Baptists, who claim 16.2 million adherents."

3. On May 29, 2008, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a General Decree titled "Regarding the crime of attempting sacred ordination of a woman." The decree reads, "Both he who has attempted to confer holy orders on a woman, and the woman who has attempted to receive the said sacrament, incurs in *latae sententiae* excommunication, reserved to the Apostolic See." To paraphrase, the CDF argued that the women had excommunicated themselves through their actions. The decree is highlighted in the preface of RCWP's 2008 book: Elsie Hainz McGrath, Bridget Mary Meehan, and Ida Raming, eds., *Women Find a Way: The Movement and Stories of Roman Catholic Womenpriests* (College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., 2008), 1-2.
4. Throughout this article, when I say "Rome" or the "Vatican," I refer to the institutional Church that claims to stand upon 2000 years of collective and coherent teachings and practices.
5. As an additional challenge for the growing womenpriest movement, RCWP has faced criticism from many Catholic feminist theologians who accuse RCWP of being *too* traditional. These progressive critics think that by retaining some traditional Catholic elements (specifically around sacraments and vestments and the distinctive role of the priest), that womenpriests are just replicating patriarchy (or kyriarchy, to credit Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza). So among the myriad forms of Catholic feminists, there is no single way to contend with "tradition."
6. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores* ("Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood") (October 15, 1976), <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul06/p6interi.htm>.
7. Here's an accessible article that explains the Cloud for non-experts: Adam Clark Estes, "What Is "the Cloud" — and Where Is It?," *Gizmodo*, Jan 29, 2015, <http://gizmodo.com/what-is-the-cloud-and-where-is-it-1682276210>. The irony of the Cloud, of course, is that while it may seem to be floating above us, ubiquitous, holding precious information, it IS in fact a physical infrastructure housed in computer-packed warehouses all around the world.