

# WOMEN AND MORALITY IN CHURCH AND STATE RELATION: Feminist Perspectives on the Vatican Discourse in International Politics

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*Religion, ethics and gender have been historically displaced by statecentric discourse of realism in international relations. Postmodern and critical feminist critique of the realist paradigm foregrounds issues of gender and religious morality. The Vatican-State with the pope, represented by the Holy See, has privileged the moral voice of the Catholic church in world politics. In international conferences on women, the church has rendered ethical perspective to various issues according to the view that natural law is the basis of international consensus. By universalizing and essentializing moral principles, the Vatican has marginalized the liberating voices of women in world affairs. Criticizing the church's moral point of view from feminist standpoints reveals gender bias against women. The church's politics of a morality has not actually liberated women from oppression, rather it has preserved patriarchy and has promoted the subordination of women under men by maintaining the hierarchical structure of the institutional church. The church constructs women along the domestic role of mothering and caring, thereby hindering their liberation by justifying their subjugation through moral theologizing. The best that both the church and the state could do to women is to help them determine themselves by personal choices rather than control them to conform to the instituted power in the international society.*

In the present paper I examine from feminist perspectives the ethical dimension of church and state relation in global setting, particularly the Catholic moral theological discourse of the Vatican in

international politics, towards articulating women's issues. My discussion delves first into theoretical concerns such as the power relation between church and state, the views on gender and morals in international relations, and the ethics of international politics. I then emphasize how Catholic religion, institutionalized in the Vatican-State, by its moral point of view, influences the political discourse of states in the conduct of international relations affecting women. Finally I inquire about the church's social and ethical teachings on women and demonstrate its gender bias against women.

The study is expository and interpretative. Methodologically, it brings in various elements from philosophy, theology and international relations and synthesizes them from the standpoints of feminism particularly radical, postmodern and critical feminist theories. It is therefore interdisciplinary which is now the evolving approach to Philippine Studies. I also aim to define such approach towards refining my proposed dissertation on this area.

### **Ethics and Church and State Relation**

Following Foucault (1984), it may be said that the mode of ideological relation between religion and politics, expressed in the institutions of church<sup>1</sup> and state, is a relation of power. One has asserted its position within, while the other has been excluded from, the official construction of knowledge of truth and reality in the society. That during the modern period, it is the church which tries to infuse its voice within the secular realm of the state, shows that the church is the "other."<sup>2</sup> Foregrounding religious discourse needs a trajectory from which the church could appropriate discourse of the state. And ethics is the conceptual bridge between religion and politics. This is the fundamental view of religious thinkers who challenge the separation of church and state.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, invokes the moral requirement of justice in the political life of society. According to him, the spiritual sphere of the church and the temporal sphere of the state are “distinct yet interrelated.” The essential task of the state is to promote just social order which it cannot achieve without the direction of reason purified by faith. The function of the church is to provide officials and citizens of the state with rational and spiritual guide which enables the state to perform its role effectively (Pope Benedict XVI, 2005). The responsibility of the church “shepherding” the people and “prophesying” about their moral life has consistently been the point taken up by members of the Philippine clergy to justify their participation in the country’s political affairs.<sup>3</sup>

The fusion of politics and religion through ethics may also be discerned by interpreting civil law. The constitutional principle of separation of church and state provides for only two clauses: non-establishment and free exercise. It does not actually bar the state from dealing with religious matters among which is morality<sup>4</sup> One paragraph in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, for instance, directs educational institutions to “strengthen ethical and spiritual values” and “develop moral character” in students. (The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, 1986 p. 49). The integration of ethical terms to the text of the constitution is described by Bishop Teodoro Bacani to be of religious character referring to it as “the work of evangelization facilitated by the Constitution.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it is in the human person where church and state necessarily coexist because the faithful who is a member of the church is at the same time also a citizen who is a member of the state (Roelker, 1942 p. 337 cited in Coquia, 1974 p. 22). These dual capacities are due to the nature of persons viewed within their historical situatedness in the world. “At the level of human thought, feeling and action, religion and politics belong together. Both are realms of human experience and discourse about the realities of life and death, of valuing, deciding, loving, caring, creating,

destroying, crying, suffering”(Ruiz, 1986 p. 14). The separation of church and state practically leads to paradox when approached historically: the more the church engages in ethical discourse to uplift the moral fiber of the faithful, the more it is drawn into meddling in the secular lives of the citizens. Justifying the paradox, the hierarchical church affirms its authority over the public domain in matters of morals, a strategy called “Politics of a Morality”(Bolasco, 1994 pp. 298-299).

The Catholic church’s politics of a morality came about after Joseph Ratzinger’s (Pope Benedict XVI) *Instructions on Christian Freedom and Liberation* described by one writer as “a sign of Vatican applying *realpolitik*.” Reiterating that the church’s moral point of view is founded on the dignity and freedom of the human person, the instruction defines the role of the church in its exercise of power to the prevailing conditions of contemporary history. Conscious of human oppressions happening in the society, the church hierarchy demonstrates its autonomous power by disentangling itself from the dominant and tyrannical groups towards greater intervention in favor of the oppressed such as in the church’s preferential option for the poor. In the process the “church becomes a church for the people.” But how much the church’s social doctrines could maintain its consistent adherence to fight against oppressions (such as the subjugation of women) through a moral politics of freedom and liberation is subject to a critique of the church’s hierarchical structure of power by voices from below (Bolasco, 1994 p. 303).

### **Privileging Gender and Morality in International Relations**

The history of international relations may be understood within the context of struggle between religious morals and political action or the power relation between church and state. Whether the ethical theme constitutes essential matter in the field of international relations is a persistent



philosophical question. Advancing the cause of morality has been a major aim of the subject, particularly in the just war tradition of the West from Aquinas to Niebuhr who thought the conduct of international relations to be fundamentally rooted on the moral doctrines of the Christian church. But at the advent of secular authoritarianism in Machiavelli passing through Hobbes's *Leviathan* and culminating in Morgenthau's Realist Theory of International relations, speculations on the subject have shifted from ethics of justice into politics of power, making the state the main actor in international relations (Vasquez, 1986 pp. 1-7).

As religion and morality have been historically displaced by political discourse of realism being the most dominant theory of international relations today, the realist paradigm has also deliberately ignored gender. Jill Steans challenges realism's statecentric approach to international relations, which she terms "orthodoxy," in order to articulate postmodern and critical feminist standpoints to the discipline now engaging in the so-called "third debate." Feminist critique of orthodoxy foregrounds women's issues (Steans, 1998 pp. 2-3).

Drawing from feminist critical theory, Steans engenders international relations by exposing the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the realist paradigm. She shows that realism is founded on the dualistic view of knowledge and reality which favors society over nature, reason over emotion and the public over the private. Since the social, rational and public areas of human life have been traditionally associated only with men, the realist theory in international relations assumes the state to be male dominated and masculinized. Steans also criticizes realism by advancing a postmodern perspective on the subject. She explains that people looking at and theorizing about the world are making sense of the world as a complex reality and building up knowledge and truth about it based on their own subjectivity—their personal, social, political, cultural points of view. There are many knowledges, hence many truths, as there are people who construct them, but academic fields limit the extent of

experiencing the world by fixing what could be legitimately talked about, thus dismissing the insignificant others by rendering them invisible behind the power of the dominant and official discourse. The realist paradigm in international relations has reduced the conceptual boundary of the subject within only the range where the state is the main actor and its voice the only genuine discourse. Since the state is male dominated, its discourse in international relations advances only men's interests, hence silencing women's issues and views. Steans challenges the statecentric and androcentric assumptions of the realist paradigm by regarding international relations as a contested terrain of concern within human agency and beyond state's power and control. She reveals and criticizes the masculine bias of realism by deconstructing the patriarchal language, imageries and symbols employed in the discourse of the state. And she privileges women's discourse by making them, as individuals and as a group, active players who determine and fulfill themselves through personal choices in the conduct of international relations (Steans, 1998 pp. 38-59).

Steans' critique of orthodoxy may be extended by incorporating in it elements of religious morals. The statecentric bias of realist paradigm in international relations dismisses all non-state entities from inclusion within the official discourse. This places religion and morality, like women, out of the international scene. Religion, ethics and feminism are therefore allies against realism. If it may be shown that issues of morality, like women's issues, may be inserted into realist paradigm, then the religious ethical standpoint espoused by the church may be articulated within statecentric discourse.

Moralizing realist international relations means reconceptualizing it as a "normative" science, according to Hutchings who frames an "ethics of international politics." "Normative theories," he writes, "are concerned with how to criticize, change and improve the world as it is." It primarily deals not with describing the existing state of affairs but with prescribing conceivable standards or norms towards which ideals the world may

develop. The basic assumption of international ethics is that morality and politics are “fundamentally distinct” and normative theorizing demonstrates how political action can be harmonized with ethical prerequisites of goodness and justice in global society. The purpose is not to replace the sovereign state, in its conduct of international relations, with a moralist institution (such as the church), but to make the state itself function within ethical sphere, a paradigm in international ethics called “morality of the state.” The morality of the state theory emphasizes “moral ideality” over “political reality.” The ideal moral standard is the basis on which political decisions and actions are to be assessed by world consensus. One idealist international theory is the ethics of natural law which asserts that “both the rights of the states over their population and the rights of states in relations to each other were derived from a higher order set of principles sanctioned by God and immanent in [human] nature.” One contentious point, however, in natural law ethics of international politics is that it assumes the immutability and universality of moral principles of rights of the states, it therefore cannot account for the relativity and particularity of what is good which each state perceives to be for its own interests (Hutchings, 1999 pp. 1-6, 28-35).

Natural law ethics is the brand of ethics advocated by the Catholic church. It has its foundation on Aquinas who conceives morality to be under the philosophical view that human beings have a rational nature and the theological view that they are made in the image and likeness of God. He claims that God has implanted in people’s innate constitution as humans a moral law which commands them to do good and avoid evil; and since all people have identical and immutable nature determined by God’s eternal will, this moral law is universal and unchanging in its ultimate principles.<sup>6</sup> By extension, natural law serves as the basis of the rights of states in international relations. Now, how may the Catholic church in its moral theological perspective legitimately join international politics is the task of the Vatican-State with the pope who holds the supreme authority of the universal church.

## **Vatican Politicizing and Proselytizing**

The seat of the papal power is the Vatican City. Only 0.44 square kilometer inside the Italian City of Rome, the Vatican City is populated by about 1,200 all adult male citizens. It is composed of two chief entities, the Vatican-State and the Holy See, over which the pope has supreme authority. The Vatican was recognized as an independent city-state by virtue of 1929 Lateran Treaty. The Holy See is the government of the Vatican-State as well as the central authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Guided by the code of canon law under the highest command of the pope, the Holy See with its College of Cardinals rules over the city-state, as well as regulates the religious life of every faithful all over the world. The Vatican-State is said to be essential to the Holy See for carrying out its universal ecclesiastical function. But no matter how it is claimed that the Vatican-State and the Holy See are separate and distinct, this does not actually take place in practice. In fact the Holy See, which holds religious capacity, also assumes, by acting as the government of the Vatican City-State, a political role in international relations (Danguilan, 1997 p. 18).

The history of the Holy See's participation in international politics started in 1944 when the Vatican City, as a state, applied for membership to the United Nations. But lacking military power and having neutrality policy, the Holy See was not accepted as a full member. It began attending UN meetings in 1951 as *ad hoc* observer, and in 1956 was elected member of the UN Economic and Social Council. In 1964 the Holy See gained non-member permanent status and began enjoying greater privileges such as participating in debates, having access to documents and addressing the General Assembly. Recently, resolutions by General Assembly calling for world conferences have invited "all states" to participate "in full, with full voting rights." And thus the Holy See has come to



hold the same rights and privileges as any member state. It now has the power to vote and to block consensus. The Holy See has actively participated in UN world conferences such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Danguilan, 1997 pp. 18-19).

The issue of the Holy See's status as a legitimate member of the UN is controversial in international relations. The question as for what genuine interest the Holy See exists in the UN, for advancing political position as a state or for imposing universal Catholic moral theology as a church, has been raised by some feminists. The main challenges against the Holy See joining in the UN are the claims that it does not possess the necessary criteria of statehood, and that its only aim is to propagate Catholic doctrines to the disadvantage of other religious denominations. These arguments however have not unseated the Holy See out of the organization (Danguilan, 1997 pp. 19-21).

It is clear that the entry point of the Vatican-State into international politics is the Holy See's religious moral stand. Addressing the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, Pope John Paul II said: "It is precisely the mission of diplomats to transcend borders and to bring people and governments together in the desire to cooperate harmoniously, in scrupulous respect for each other's competencies, but at the same time in the quest for a higher common good" (John Paul II, 2005). In an article the Holy See describes its role in the United Nations: "As a full member of international community, the Holy See finds itself in a very peculiar situation, because it is spiritual in nature. Its authority... is religious and not political ... The real and only realm of the Holy See is the realm of conscience"(cited in Danguilan, 1997 p. 21).

The uncompromising point of the Catholic church's moral theologizing in international politics is its adherence to a universal moral

law believed to be contained in human nature. And this view seems to be confirmed by the fundamental principle upon which the UN is founded. Speaking before the UN General Assembly in 1995, John Paul II called universal moral law “a common human patrimony” shared by the Catholic church and all the UN members. He referred to the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the “highest expression of the human conscience.” These rights are “rooted in the human person” and “reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law.”

There is a moral logic built into human life and which makes possible dialogue between individuals and peoples. If we want a century of violent coercion to be succeeded by a century of persuasion, we must find a way to discuss the human future intelligibly. The universal moral law written on the human heart is precisely that kind of “grammar” which is needed if the world is to engage this discussion of its future (John Paul II. 1995).

The pope, in effect, was claiming that for global politics to succeed, all states, in formulating international laws, need to adopt universal ethical principles which the Catholic church’s moral theology of natural law could provide. The fundamental point is that, by essence, moral law prevails over civil law, and ethics over politics, hence, in international relations, Vatican-State over other states! Eventually, by providing moral ideals towards which political decisions and actions of global proportion are ought to be directed, the Vatican State, through moral theologizing by the Holy See during world conferences, has conceptualized and practically enforced a natural law ethics of international politics.

### **Vatican Imperialism**

The Vatican with the pope has been very influential in world affairs from medieval times to the present that its power is described as one of “imperialism” (Manhattan, 1985). The Inquisition, explorations of the planet

and evangelizations of people are testaments of its global domination. It commands billions of faithful, its doctrines taught in all Catholic parishes and schools, and the voice of the pope is echoed by cardinals, bishops, priests and religious people over the world.

The oft quoted statement by Stalin, "How many divisions has the pope?" simply misses the point. The might of the Vatican with the pope is not military, rather it is religious in nature. Avro Manhattan describes this religious power as "the greatest machinery of spiritual coercion in existence." According to him, this power is made possible by the Vatican's "peculiar position" in world affairs.

Although a Church, she [the Vatican church-state] is at the same time a sovereign government. Although a mighty religious institution, she is also a mighty political presence and a major diplomatic center. Although territorially the smallest state in existence, yet hers is the most significant in the world. And although neither an empire, a kingdom nor a republic, it is a mixture of all three... Because of all of these and because of her spiritual power trespassing into the ethical, social and political fields, she is capable of affecting and does affect the behavior of individuals and of society at all levels, simultaneously, on a local and international scale (Manhattan, 1985 pp. 26-27).

Doctrinally, Vatican imperialism is founded on the belief in the "omnipotence of the popes and their claims to universal dominion" (Manhattan, 1985 p. 50). This absolutizing and universalizing stand of the Catholic church's natural law ethics of international politics concerning church and state relations, may be gleaned from the statement by Pope Pius X in his encyclical letter *Il Firmo Proposito*.

The church can, and indeed must, intervene in the affairs of men, including politics. Immense in the field of Catholic action, it excludes absolutely nothing which in any manner, directly or indirectly, belongs to the divine mission of the Church... Union of mind therefore requires together with a perfect accord in

accord in one Faith complete submission and obedience of will to the Church, to the Roman Pontiff as to God himself. (cited in Manhattan, 1985 p. 47).

Administratively, the Vatican power of global proportion, under the supreme authority of the pope, is enforced and sustained by a great number of Catholic people and religious organizations all over the world. According to the 2006 edition of the *Annuaris Pontificio*, the official Vatican Yearbook, there are now 1,098,000,000 Catholics comprising 17% of global population (<http://www.cwnews.com>). In 2004, it is reported that there were in the world 405,450 Catholic priests, 54,620 religious brothers and 776,269 religious sisters, and there were 219,655 parishes (<http://car/georgetown.edu>). At present the Vatican maintains permanent diplomatic relations with 179 sovereign states most of which have the papal nuncio as the head of diplomatic corps (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

In practice, how Vatican imperialism takes place may be seen by its conduct of international relations. The Holy See during world conferences had advanced and imposed its Catholic moral theology. Its essentializing and universalizing Catholic ethics had rallied some states on its side. During UN Conferences, it had practically divided the member states into ethical terms as “moral” and “immoral,” or into denominational terms as “Catholic” and “non-Catholic,” thereby undermining realism’s statecentric paradigm.<sup>7</sup> The Holy See had been very persistent in advancing its moral theology. A rather strong remark came from the Holy See’s ambassador Archbishop Martino who “declared that anyone who differed from the position of the Vatican on the Cairo Conference document lacked moral and ethical grounding.” But it was not only the Holy See which propounded ethical dimensions to international proceedings; Islamic countries also consistently did. But it was the Holy See which had been so powerfully vocal and influential because of its institutionalized and privileged status as a member of international community (Danguilan, 1997 p. 28).



## Vatican and Philippine-State Relation

The universalizing effect of Vatican ethics has been felt by states engaging in international relations. Especially the Philippines, being a predominantly Catholic country and the only one in Asia, the Vatican exerts great influence in the political affairs of the Philippine-state. In 2004, 86% of the country's total population were Catholics. There were 7,335 priests, 5,694 religious brothers and 12,102 religious sisters, and there were 2,909 parishes in 86 diocese (<http://car/georgetown.edu>).

According to Marilen Danguilan, the country is said to be carrying out its international relations within "Vatican power and control."<sup>8</sup> In her book, *Women in Brackets: A Chronicle of Vatican Power and Control*, she talks about how the Filipino delegates to UN international conferences, who were supposed to advance feminist perspectives to issues affecting women, had been dominated by Catholic moralizing through the willing participation by the Philippine government itself.

Another point of inquiry regarding international relations between the Vatican and Philippines is the practice of state visit as a political encounter between government leaders but at the same time a religious journey by the visitor as a church member. When President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo went to the Vatican on June 28, 2006 she brought Pope Benedict XVI a "gift," that is, the abolition of death penalty.<sup>9</sup> The visit turned out to be not purely a political encounter but also a religious pilgrimage replete with spiritual gestures and moral underpinnings. This only shows how Arroyo is willing to transform the issue of death penalty into a moral issue and apply to it Catholic ethics in order to please the pope during her state visit to the Vatican.

The pope has used state visit as a platform for compromising church doctrines and state policies. The visit to the Philippines by

Pope John Paul II in January 1995 coincided with the celebration of Tenth World Youth Day. President Fidel Ramos declared classes suspended in all schools in Metro Manila during the visit. Some sectors questioned the constitutionality of the declaration for it would favor Catholicism over other religions. But the president justified his decision by claiming that the pope was a political leader from the Vatican and that his coming to the country was therefore an official state visit and it was just proper that he be accorded with utmost cordial reception by the republic. But the papal visit was also a religious engagement with millions of Catholics. It became a stage for theological indoctrination by the pope as the spiritual shepherd of the people where he talked about the moral value of Christian love as well as the evil of abortion, artificial contraception and premarital sex and the moral danger of reproductive health.

### **Catholic Moral Theology on Women**

The Catholic church's theological and ethical doctrines on women are rooted on the medieval philosophical view on the moral nature and dignity of the human person. Aquinas believes that people are both rational and free beings created by God. All things tend towards perfection, or they act for an end or good. But only human beings through reason act with knowledge of the end or the consciousness of what is good implanted on their nature and known through the dictate of conscience. Because they are aware of the end proper to them, people move themselves towards perfection by means of their own rational judgment and will, hence they are free. Freewill consists not in following one's tendencies and desires but in being able to regulate them under the rule of right reason. People have the moral duties to develop their bodies, instincts and sensitive powers, and their social, mental and artistic inclinations based on human rational nature. The last end that people ought to attain is God. As the ultimate perfection of intellectual life is the contemplation of the essence of God,

that of the moral life is the possession of the being of God, the supreme good (D'Arcy, 1955 pp. 172-176).

The current Catholic moral theology on women cited in international conferences,<sup>10</sup> are found in John Paul II's apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (John Paul II, 1988) and in his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* (John Paul II, 1995). Both works highlight the traditional doctrine on the rational nature and freedom of human persons as the foundation of their ethical life in the society which today is threatened by the moral pitfalls of individualism, hedonism and utilitarianism. These Catholic documents teach that by reason people discern God's will written on their nature, so that they ought to act according to the demands of right reason. By freedom a person opens up the self for others. But freedom is not a warrant to do anything one wishes, rather it is understood as a "gift" of self. Being a gift, a person offers oneself to God, towards knowing and loving God and following the divine will. A person also offers oneself to fellow human beings, towards working with them or even sacrificing for them. Being both human beings, women and men possess reason and freedom in the same way. But the two have different specificities in realizing each one's rational and free nature. To realize their human essence, women ought to act based on reason, that is, to know and obey God's plan stamped on their female personality; and to act based on freedom, that is, to greater enhance human life through their unique feminine dispositions.

According to *Mulieris Dignitatem*, God created a human being only as a man or a woman! This basic premise implies that the dignity of women are equal with that of men since they have identical human nature. But the two have different specificities. The "archetype of personal dignity of women," the symbol of "what is feminine," is Mary. Mary obeyed God's will without hesitation then immaculately conceived and gave birth to Christ

the Redeemer. She participated in the history of salvation which would not be possible without her submission. This salvific role of the individual woman, Mary, constitutes the dignity of all women in the world. And since there are two dimensions of the female personality manifested by Mary, which are motherhood and virginity, then all other women by vocation must also be mothers and virgins. These two dimensions coexist only in Mary being the virgin mother of God, that is why she is "blessed among women." By being a mother or a virgin, a woman personally exercises her freedom as a "sincere gift" of self to others—to her husband and children as a spouse and mother by marriage, or to being a spiritual partner of Christ for the sake of evangelical ministry similar to priestly celibacy.

Human parenthood, says *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "is the fruit of the marriage union of a man and a woman" who, by spousal love with one another, are "one flesh," and who, by "conjugal knowledge," participate in the "creative power of God" through bringing forth a new person into the world. Motherhood is a "special" and "most demanding part" of parenthood compared to fatherhood. It is linked biologically to the "personal structure of a woman" whose "very physical constitution is naturally disposed to motherhood." It is linked also spiritually to the personal dimension of freedom because it is the woman who carries in the womb a human child to whom she gives a "sincere gift of self" by offering the energy of her own body and soul during pregnancy and childbirth. These innate capacities to conceive and to give birth predispose a woman towards greater gift of self to child upbringing and to caring for others, thus eventually realizing in uniquely feminine way the "ethical order of love" which all human beings must have for one another.

Human earthly life, begins *Evangelium Vitae*, "consists in sharing the very life of God." This fact commands people to uphold



the intrinsic moral value of human life which is at present threatened by a “culture of death” manifested in forms of lethal assault against the innocent and powerless at early stage of life. Abortion and artificial contraception have assumed the attribute of “rights” having been legalized by the state and made available through health-care services. From the Catholic ethical perspective, abortion is a direct form of murder and contradicts the virtue of justice; contraception undermines the value of sexual act and conjugal love and is against the virtue of chastity in marriage. Although different forms of evil, the two fundamentally result from the individual’s hedonism and sexual irresponsibility and the state’s utilitarian policies. At the personal level, abortion and contraception destroy freedom as one’s gift of self to another, hence jeopardizing one’s human nature and dignity. In the social order, they endanger the tradition of marriage and family, hence collapsing the basic institution on which the survival of dignified life depends.

*Evangelium Vitae*’s ethical teaching points to the nature of the human body, the male and female compositions by means of whose interaction in conjugal act a new person is conceived and developed. Within the cultural orientation brought by abortion and contraception, the body is reduced to “pure materiality,” and sexuality is “depersonalized and exploited” primarily on the part of the woman in whose womb an unborn child is entrusted. A woman precisely is a “mother who carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, respecting it in its otherness.” A mother manifests genuine human relation which is the acceptance of another person in her womb “who is recognized and loved because of the dignity from being a person not from other considerations such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change.”

## **Women's Voices**

It has long been affirmed by feminists how religion and politics have placed women under the dominion of men! A passionate thinker Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1895 wrote:

The canon and civil laws; church and state; priests and legislators; all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man an inferior being subject to man. Creeds, codes, scriptures and statutes are all based on this idea. The fashions, forms, ceremonies and customs of society, church ordinances and disciplines all grow out of this idea (Stanton, 1974 p. 7).

The church that is supposed to bring women's souls into salvation, and the state that is supposed to deliver them from injustice in the world, both have become the very instruments of their oppression. No other form of subjugation could be worse than women condemned in both heaven and earth, during both this life and beyond, by both God and men. Women's oppression in international relations must be terribly acute, indeed, when it comes from the Vatican that is both theologically and politically antagonizing. But gladly, women's voices are now being heard.

Marilen Danguilan tells about the various reactions by women against the Vatican tirades during UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing. Mainly, the essentializing and universalizing religious morals insisted by the Holy See has been the point criticized by feminists. "I think it is very hard to negotiate with a government that believes it is infallible," said one feminist delegate. The Vatican "is not a country that negotiates differences. This is a country that believes in all or nothing" (Danguilan, 1997 p. 91). And an Indian woman asked: "why is one issue, one set of religious values dominating the conference?" (Danguilan, 1997 p. 100).

Assent to a universal system of human value, moral or legal, is a product of multilateral agreement, an international consensus among people and states and not of imposition by power as what Vatican had done during the conference. It is, therefore, a mistake for the pope to claim that UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a proof of the existence of a universal moral law inscribed in human nature; it is rather a sign of states and people coming together, talking about and approving amicably a proposition deemed to be universally valid. One UN organization which aims to develop universal rights of women is the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). "An international standard setting instrument" declaring in univocal terms the "universality of the principle of equal rights between men and women," CEDAW presently has 173 state signatories (CEDAW pamphlet, n.d.). There is no wonder why Vatican is not one of the signatories, because CEDAW arrived at universal principle through consensus and not through imposition by power.

Another point for feminist critique of the Catholic church is its hierarchical structure. Ecclesiology states that all people share in one and the same grace, and the hierarchy exhibits merely "functional inequality," which is believed to be divinely inspired, such as only the male clergy could administer sacraments (Legazpi, 1997 p. 79). However such exclusivity extends to the social supremacy of the clergy over laypeople. This makes the church, by maintaining its hierarchical structure, unable to fully realize its preferential option for the lowly and the oppressed, in spite of applying its politics of a morality to fight against state domination. The church hierarchy itself becomes the instrument of further subjugation of people by promoting their subservience under other instituted power in the society.<sup>11</sup>

Feminists also question the nature of Catholic hierarchy as exclusively composed of men—pope, bishops and priests. And it teaches primarily about male divinities—God the Father and the Son. With this

setup, women personalities are forever outside the church, and women issues marginalized in its official discourse. As laypeople, women are always under the authority of male clergy. In fact, the church is a patriarchal institution with misogynist and androcentric orientations. According to radical feminists such as Mary Daly, the key to women's liberation from men's subordination is the demise of patriarchy as the prevailing structure of religious institution (Daly, 1973).

From feminist standpoint, the Catholic view on the human person shows gender bias against women. The Vatican teaches about women's limited capacity for self determination and fulfillment:

The Vatican church constructs a vision of men and women in which men are normative persons and women are primarily understood in terms of their reproductive and mothering capacities. The most serious implication of this outmoded anthropology are apparent in terms, definitions and proposals that are built on inaccurate premise... The roles of women in family life, in the workplace and in politics are all limited and understood in terms of this anthropology. Nothing accrues to women simply because they are human (Danguilan, 1997 p. 152).

This "definition has not gone beyond women's reproductive dimensions, the only parameter against which women have to perform and against which they are to be judged" (Danguilan, 1997 p. 152). Rather than ascribing to women the full human freedom as capacity for self determination and transcendence, the church in fact has limited women to function within only the domestic realm and to perform only activities of caring. This exactly is the traditional role construction of women in the society, the source of their oppressive condition from which women have been trying to liberate themselves.

From the viewpoint of feminism, the pope's moral theology on women reveals inherent masculine prejudice. The dignity of all women in



the world is symbolically represented by the essential role in the history of salvation played by Mary as the virgin mother of God. But in spite of Mary's profound place in biblical theology, it cannot be denied that her woman's role is merely secondary and peripheral within the Christocentric paradigm. It is a man, Jesus, believed also to be a God, who is central to the gospel story and to all dogmas derived from it. Mary is the mother of Jesus, and her immaculate conception, her virginity, is prepared for the sake of Jesus. Mary is important only in relation to Jesus who is the Son of God the Father (Woodhead, 1996 p. 130). Also this gendered linguistic symbolism reveals the patriarchal structure of Christian religion. "If God is male, then the male is God" says Daly. This means that, as God is superior to men, so men is superior to women. This line of reasoning assumes an androcentric logic which radical feminist theology aims to eradicate (Daly, 1973 p.19).

Women from the religious sector are also articulating feminist views even to the detriment of the church's established beliefs. Two Catholic nuns responded against the pastoral letter issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines before the Beijing conference in 1995. They emphasized women's free exercise of personal choices to determine their lives:

Grateful to God for the gift and privilege of motherhood, we nevertheless believe that motherhood is not essential to being a woman. We value the contribution of religious women and other single women to both church and society. For some women, motherhood is their sole career, others choose to combine motherhood with other careers, still others forego the possibility of motherhood altogether. It is women themselves that must make a decision. The choice is theirs; it cannot be dictated (Danguilan, 1997 p. 167).

This value of women's capacity to determine and fulfill themselves through personal choices has also been the perspective by Sister Mary John Mananzan, a feminist Catholic nun. Mindful

of her unconventional position against the dogmas of the institutional church, she articulates human freedom as the supreme moral principle upon which women's chosen actions, such as artificial contraception and abortion, are to be assessed. And she writes in reflection about her spiritual journey towards women's movement:

For a long time, I was sustained by the image of God as the Almighty Father. At this point in my journey, my God no longer has a face. His is the spirit that moves me to draw energy from the deepest part of myself to sustain meaningful action on behalf of justice and the liberation of people from every oppressive situation. My faith in God ... is the continuing thread in the tapestry of a life of changing themes and designs of which feminism is now the dominant theme.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Danguilan closes her book with a suggestion on how the church and the state could best relate to one another in matters of women's issues:

in the meantime, when church leaders and state officials confer on ways to regulate fertility, it would be worth their while to remember that women do possess an intelligence and capacities and are capable of making rational and moral choices. The least that government and church should do is to support the women in the choices they make and not to condemn them or send them to jail. Not to seduce them with the promise of sanctifying grace if they continue to live with violent and abusive husbands, or to threaten them with hellfire (Danguilan, 1997 p. 208).

## **Conclusion**

The paper demonstrates that ethics is the link between religion and politics. But issues of religion and morals have been historically displaced by statecentric discourse of realism. Realism has also ignored gender.

Critique of realism foregrounds issues of gender and religious morality. Engendering international relations means articulating postmodern and critical feminist standpoints to the realist paradigm. The Vatican-State with the pope, represented by the Holy See, has privileged the moral voice of Catholic church in international politics. In UN Conferences, the Holy See rendered ethical perspective to various issues according to the view that natural law is the basis of international consensus. By universalizing and essentializing moral principles, the Vatican has marginalized the liberating voice of women in world affairs.

Criticizing the church's moral point of view from feminist standpoint reveals gender bias against women. Its politics of a morality has not actually liberated women from oppression, rather it has preserved patriarchy and has promoted the subordination of women under men by maintaining the hierarchical structure of the institutional church. The church constructs women along the domestic role of mothering and caring, thereby hindering their liberation by justifying their subjugation through moral theologizing. Some states, having been pressured by the church, tend to adapt their policies to the Vatican position in world politics. Finally, the best that both church and state could do to women is to help them determine themselves by personal choices rather than control them to conform to the instituted power in the international society.

The women's issues in international relations which feminism has advanced in this paper pose extended questions. Philosophically, the dynamics between religion and politics from feminist standpoints may be reduced into the debate between essentialism and existentialism. Is a woman determined by an unchanging and eternal will of some pre-established nature, or does she determine herself through personal choices? Catholic moral theology stands on tradition and authority without which its very foundation as an institution would collapse. Its aim is to unite people within one belief as one people of God. The theological question concerns the nature of human freedom in relation to church as an institution:

Has the church the right to impose upon women its universalizing morals? The question of morality in international relations may be interpreted anthropologically as the conflict between cultural absolutism and historical particularism: Is there a system of value valid univocally for all people in the world, or is there only some sets of prescribed behavior for some people constructed by social and cultural conditioning relative to each one's community?

But in the final analysis, in postmodern thinking, all these questions would boil down to the dynamics of power: Who talks and for whose interest? Who are inarticulate and weak? Power relation governs the world! For the fact that religion and politics have already established their dominance in the society, and women have been silenced by the prevalent theological and political discourses, feminists can only hope that their voices would somehow be allowed to be heard through the church's and state's compassion and humility, the very virtues which ecclesiastical leaders and government officials must morally possess but which, paradoxically, the exercise of their power to stay in position does not permit them to do.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The usage of the term "church" in this paper is specific. In Leonardo S. Legazpi, *The Church We Love* (Manila: UST Pub. House, 1997), 25-69, a theologian explains the three senses by which the term is used. Theologically, church refers to the people of God, to Christ's mystical body. Geographically, it means the building: chapel or cathedral. And structurally, church refers to the hierarchy composed of the pope, bishops and priests. The paper employs the last sense. Also in Catholic writings, "church" is a feminine noun substituted by the English pronoun "she" or "her". The paper refers to church as "it" to make the term gender neutral, following the feminist theologian Mary Daly in *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) and in *Beyond God the Father* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1973).



<sup>2</sup> Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, "Modernity, Traditionality, and the Promise of Life: The Relation of Religion and Politics Reconsidered" in National Council of Churches in the Philippines, *Theology, Politics and Struggle* (Quezon City: Phil. Graphic Arts Inc., 1986). The paradigm of modernity by its adherence to objective logic of the new science has established the secularity and temporality of the state over the subjective and spiritual position of the church which in its paradigm of traditionality had previously enjoyed authority in the society.

<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) being deeply aware of the "burning social issues" writes in one pastoral letter: "As shepherds we offer our moral and religious guidance... We invite you, our beloved People, to use our reflections as Pastors to help guide your own discernment, discussion, decision and action." CBCP Pastoral Letter on Social Concerns, "Shepherding and Prophesying in Hope" in <http://www.cbcponline.net/>. Accessed on 9 August 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Ranhillo Callangan Aquino, "The Constitution and the Catholic Church," in San Beda Graduate School of Law Journal, (Vol.1, Jan., 206), 1-2. A Catholic priest, Aquino is presently the academic head of the Philippine Supreme Court's Judicial Academy.

<sup>5</sup> Teodoro C. Bacani, *The Church and Politics*. (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1987), 107. Bishop Bacani was a member of 1986 Constitutional Convention. The constitution is "in accord with Catholic teaching" he says, implying as if the constitution requires a moral theologian's *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas' treatise on moral law is found in his *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 90-94, and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 111-114.

<sup>7</sup> Danguilan in *Women in Brackets*, 93, reports that the consistent allies of the Vatican during the Cairo Conference were the Catholic countries in South America and those associated with Pope John Paul II such as Costa Rica, Argentina, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Malta, Benin, Poland and Slovakia. The Philippines being predominantly Catholic country and the only one in Asia, Danguilan claims to be under "Vatican power and control," the observation that forms the substance of her book.

<sup>8</sup> Danguilan, *Women in Brackets*. This books tells the personal experience of the author in joining UN international conferences and how the proceedings have been influenced by the local Catholic church and the Vatican's Holy See.

<sup>9</sup> As I heard from 24 Oras in GMA-7 on the evening of June 29, 2006, Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye called it a "gift." This "gift" Pres. Arroyo handed over to Pope Benedict XVI was actually a book bound copy of Executive Order for the Abolition of Death Penalty.

<sup>10</sup> In Cairo and Beijing as reported by Danguilan, *Women in Brackets*. 153.

<sup>11</sup> Bolasco, "Politics of a Morality," 304. Bolasco explains this point by quoting from Otto Maduro *Religion and Social Conflicts* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Guillermina Mananzan (Sister Mary John, OSB) by Cynthia Rose Banzon-Bautista in *Towards Feminist Consciousness*, ed. Sylvia H. Guerrero (Quezon City: University Center for Women's Studies, University of the Philippines, 1997), 77-88.

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