



Clergywomen and the Future

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In a recently completed in-depth study of seventeen clergywomen¹ I documented the women's perceptions of the ways they came into the ministry, are dealing with social expectations, and are doing their ministerial tasks. I wanted to know what their worlds of personal and professional reality look like to them and how such worldviews compare to major aspects of an emerging worldview paradigm described by many "futurist" social thinkers as currently gathering momentum and required for species survival.

The study has four major elements: (1) an extensive review of the literature of futuristic social thought; (2) a summary of generally accepted conclusions from the literature on gender differentiation; (3) a phenomenological study of seventeen clergywomen; and (4) a comparison and integration of findings from the three areas of inquiry.

I. FUTURIST THINKING ABOUT WORLDVIEWS

Especially since the '60s, much social science attention has been directed toward worldview paradigm transition among people in U.S. society, and toward the content of the mental models under which people live their daily lives. The complex megaprocess "world modernization" has been operating to stimulate substantial erosion of trust in traditional institutions and values. The institutions themselves are in turmoil and flux. So it is no surprise that personal identity stability, implying a counterpoint of stable institutions, is a major twentieth century problematic. Who am I? Where am I going? What is real? These perennial questions appear with special poignancy now, along with pandemic fears about present or impending large-scale crises.

¹Martha Long Ice, *Clergywomen and Their Worldviews: Calling for a New Age* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

Various scholars and commentators speak of a cultural deficit in integrative images of reality and in ways of organizing public life to support personal identity. From Fritjof Capra,² a high energy physicist, I take a representative quotation:

It is easy to see that our society has constantly favored the yang over the yin—rational knowledge over intuitive wisdom, science over religion, competition over cooperation, exploitation of natural resources over conservation, and so on. This emphasis, supported by the patriarchal system and further encouraged by the dominance of sensate culture during the past three centuries, has led to a profound

cultural imbalance which lies at the very root of our current crisis—an imbalance in our thoughts and feelings, our values and attitudes, and our social and political structure.

At different levels of social experience the yearnings, intentions, and species imperatives these authors³ mention point toward a model for social reality idealizing part/whole balance and cooperative existence. Altogether they emphasize certain ideas as representing what one of them calls “the rising paradigm.” While any summary of a complex literature risks distortion of the original arguments, such a summary also can serve to clarify essential points. The following paragraphs are my understanding of the shared substance of the literature reviewed concerning matters of: (1) reality imaging, (2) personal identity formation, and (3) institutional development.

Idea 1. Something different is happening in the world; history is taking a crucial turn. Revolutions in the integration of world-level culture, personal consciousness, and social order are, and must be, occurring so that the human species may move viably into the next evolutionary era (given the circumstances of world-wide technological modernization). The major premise is that the healthy development and creative functioning of any unit of life must be understood in terms of the other parts and of the whole. A balance must be maintained between the integrity of component parts and the integrity of the organism, for the full functioning of each. Societies, individuals, and universes are each other’s life-forming processes.

Idea 2. For satisfactory ego-maturation and effective social participation, a new equalitarian order of consciousness is said to be required of individuals. Persons’ knowledge and intentions in experience—even their feelings and valuings—need dynamic conceptualizations that are at home with trust, hope, and faith rooted in a truth about reality that is always, to some degree, uncertain (in that it is always unfolding in its revelation, just as we are always unfolding in our comprehension). Certainty becomes an ongoing community quest. The new order of consciousness must be coupled with a new order of relationship techniques. Equalitarian conflict resolution skills must move beyond the realm of therapy and come to be an intuited dimension of the socialization process. Then cooperative solidarity can emerge as the common negotiated order of species life—familial to cosmic. A dependable, non-absolutist morality of responsible caring needs to be modeled and internalized normatively. It must emerge from the recurring responses of holistically

²Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

³Some of the others are Robert Bellah, Michael Harrington, Erich Jantsch, John Naisbett, Mark Satin, Florida Scott-Maxwell, Arnold Toynbee.

oriented persons to human need at all levels.

Idea 3. What is required of new paradigm institutions is simply a different level of the requirements for individuals. Mid-level social orders must be articulated with caring attention to the welfare of internal human “parts” and to the surrounding environment as well. Hierarchical structures must give way to “bottom-up” democratic process.

The picture of societal realities, requirements, trends, and possibilities laid out in the literature reviewed provides a clear convergence of opinion that social living in the modern world now functionally demands behaviors and ideals at all levels of expression that are

maximally equalitarian, cooperative, holistic, and flexible. The traditional, more hierarchical, competitive, fragmented, and absolutist arrangements are judged by these scholars to be literally antisocial. That is, such arrangements are deemed opposed to the best interests and well-being of persons and of social collectivities, at this point in time.

The favored worldview paradigm assumes both the necessity and possibility of the stated knowledge/action ideals. Truth under this model is the highest attainable coherence in the resolution of traditional and existential meanings. Authoritarian certainty is indefensible by the new paradigm's assumptions, which, instead, imply an ongoing communal project of clarifying what's truest to think and best to do.

Veteran survey researcher Daniel Yankelovich⁴ talks about the "new story" Americans are beginning to compose as revolutionary new ways of conceiving of life and its meaning arise spontaneously from the great mass of common people and enter into their decisions and aspirations.

II. GENDER DIFFERENTIATION

We now turn to a different pool of information, the literature of gender differentiation. In addition to a small list of sex differences clearly determined by genetic heritage, many gender distinctions stemming from developmental socialization in U.S. society have been found to exist. Wide-ranging empirical evidence supports the conclusion that male and female cognitive, decisional, and relational styles, e.g., emphasize contrasting themes and criteria.

I certainly do not want to imply that male and female characteristics separate neatly into mutually exclusive sets. Their distribution is represented by overlapping normal curves; *human* characteristics are shared across the sex categories but the frequencies differ systematically by sex.

Faced, from birth, with gender differences in social expectations, obligations, and entitlements, males and females develop quite different perceptual/conceptual grids as they try to make sense of what's happening to them. For the purposes of this research some of the most pertinent suggested polarities are the following.

Females are disposed to develop skills of personal nurturance, integrative thinking, peer negotiation, and intuitive judgement, excelling in creative adaptation to environmental particulars. They tend to focus on complex systems, as such, and see the parts in terms of the whole. Males are more apt to

⁴Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules* (New York: Random House, 1981).

develop skills of abstract analysis, linear logic, and visual/spatial judgment, aggressively imposing rational control on dynamic processes toward some desired goal or accomplishment. They are likely to concentrate with high intensity on limited aspects of phenomena and to understand wholes as assemblages of discrete component items.

Males tend to conceptualize ethical issues in terms of abstract principles and hierarchical entitlements. Females are more inclined to weigh both the competing ethical responsibilities for maintaining supportive relationships and the possibilities for maximizing collective well-being.

Men typically enter relationships for what may be accomplished through the association. Friendships for men take the form of companionship in a desired project or activity, with the

activity forming the primary focus of the contact. Women form friendships more for their intrinsic value, developing trust and closeness through extended processes of mutual self-disclosure, mutual nurture, and informal trust-building negotiations. Even in work associations women still maintain a primary focus on the relationship aspect; and even in personal relationships men continue to accent the joint activity aspect.

Women commonly report their most satisfying and clear sense of who they are as occurring within the intimacy context. Men rather seem to experience strong threats to their self-boundary maintenance from close associations. Separation, for men, provides the most unmistakable affirmation of individual identity.

Whereas leadership may be imaged by men as a high position in a hierarchy of command and dominance, women often image leadership more naturally as a central facilitating position in a network of peer-negotiated operations.

Penetrating all the other gender differences is the most persistent and pervasive difference of all—the difference in social power. Males receive the primary entitlement in U.S. society to “say what’s *really* so” publicly, normatively, and officially—putting females traditionally under social judgment as defective or derivative, by male standards.

Current scholarship continues to deliver a rich outpouring of theoretical and empirical work focused on these gender role distinctions and their sources. An extensive literature documents the differences within U.S. society and seeks to explain their existence in terms of human biogenetic heritage and the circumstances of childhood socialization.⁵ Such theoretical explanations imply that until and unless human babies are presented, from birth, with available intimacy involving both male and female adults (adults who engage in respectful, mutually satisfying cooperative arrangements), the identity separation project will not culminate consistently in self-confident, generative adult women and men with adequate peer discourse skills.

III. INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT OF GENDER INCLUSIVENESS IN LEADERSHIP

My study does not test the correctness of these widely-noted gender dis-

⁵Chafetz, Chodorow, Gilligan, Maccoby and Jacklin, Rossi, Rubin, Stockard and Johnson, Block, and others have built on the insights of earlier thinkers, such as Freud, Jung, Mead, Piaget, and Erikson to suggest credible understandings of sex role divisions.

tinctions often described as typical of males and females in U.S. culture. It does seek to avoid either simplistic acceptance or dismissal of such comparisons by searching in the biographical data from women clergy for indications of how religious institutions may be affected by female leadership.

The investigation had strictly limited intentions and conclusions. I set out to document the empirical reality of seventeen clergywomen’s *subjective* experiences of their ministerial roles. In addition, I gathered their autobiographical accounts of early childhood, youth, education, and entry into professional status. Given that the study was designed to identify reasonable hypotheses rather than to test them, I purposely selected a group of informants that represented as much variety as possible in personal background. There are thirteen whites and four blacks; ages range from twenties to seventies; they are married and single—some never married, some re-

married, some divorced, and one lesbian; they come out of affluence, working class, middle class, and poverty; they represent twelve denominational groups in Christianity and Judaism; in their clergy assignments they are senior pastors, assistant pastors, “co-pastors,” sole pastors, and non-parish specialists. All, however, were said by colleagues or supervisors to be “successful,” i.e., apt to be influential over time.

I was especially attentive to the women’s subjective constructions of (1) self-image, (2) notions of ministry, (3) views of institutional settings, (4) absorbing preoccupations. I wanted to know, and to report carefully, these intersubjective realities in a way that illuminates crucial dynamics in religious institutional development. The overall objective was to make clear how the women arrived at, and are functioning in, a role previously occupied almost entirely by men.

Religions of the western world have tended toward images of God as ultimate patriarch—the seat of cosmic control. One consequence has been the intensely *yang* (or, roughly, “male” mode) emphasis. *Yin* aspects (or more “female” facets) of the traditions have been ignored or submerged routinely, though often recognized officially. Many futurist social thinkers are currently of the opinion that social pathologies at all levels of organization result from such institutionalized imbalances.

Classical western world assumptions of patriarchy, scientism, and world mastery are challenged by the mere presence of females in the crucial religious role of clergy authority, let alone by how women, as persons, come to exercise their options. Insofar as women are allowed to occupy the role, the organizational structure of denominations is faced with revision of a potentially radical sort.

Clergywomen have assumed a leadership role in an institutional sector heavy with traditional meanings. Among the meanings is the longstanding assumption that women do not do such things because women are not fit by God to do such things. Yet here they are, carrying institutionally legitimated religious knowledge from the society and to the society—*transacting* social meanings. They are entrusted with identifying a God who is perceived, met, described, and served in social experience. It is logical to anticipate non-trivial changes in any institution that makes a systematic shift such as this in the categories from which leadership personnel are recruited.

The worldview apparent in the informant data suggests that increasing

numbers of women in clergy positions may subtly shift the course of institutional religion toward a way of spiritual searching congruent with the new paradigm’s emphases. Where the women informants do not hold the entire view explicitly, they, at the very least, represent the orientation thought by the futurists to be needed for balancing the present bureaucratic, technological skew in society.

Whatever we think of given religions or beliefs, the personal and societal need to have a trustworthy vision of what is ultimately true and worth our loyalty remains an essential (and essentially religious) requirement of human existence, according to many scholars (though it may not be expressed always in conventional or institutionalized ways).

Traditionally religious institutions are looked to and counted on for lending stability to life in troubled times; but they themselves are changing in fundamental ways. The admission of women to leadership is one of them. In admitting women to official religious influence, groups

already indicate some redefinition of reality, in that it signals both a changed outlook among *existing* authorities and also the incorporation of *new* authorities with a different perspective.

IV. CLERGYWOMEN PERSPECTIVES

I shall offer only a taste of the data displays. Throughout the chapters of the completed study, I seek to show how the clergywomen interviewed display a primary life orientation typical of females in U.S. society. I use over fifty pages of direct quotations from interviews in order to establish the informants' focus on personal values, intrinsic satisfactions, integrative thinking, responsible caring, anti-hierarchical management, and related themes.

Here are some representative quotations in three thematic areas; first, some informant quotations showing the high value placed on personal closeness as an intrinsically satisfying experience:⁶

- One of the greatest rewards in the ministry is being with people at moments important to them—celebrations, hurtings, times of growth and change.
- Being let into people's lives is such a privilege—the connecting with people and sharing a vision.
- I love it when people open up and share deeply from their lives or when they brighten visibly in my presence.
- I want people to be glad that I have been part of their lives. It is a great joy being received into people's lives...being able to share at crisis times...feeling that my presence may have helped in some way...feeling in *partnership with people*.
- The best part is when people let you in and let you love them and they love you back...when people say, "Here's my gut; I'll trust you with it."
- Women are very ambivalent about the distance that status, privilege—even ordination itself—create. We want solidarity with people.

The following selections are among those I use to point to an emphasis

⁶Each "bullet" marker indicates a quotation from one of the clergywomen informants.

on equalitarian leadership ideals:

- Parenting and ministry used to interfere with each other. There was a lot of guilt stuff for me on both sides for a while. Now I am able to ask the church to minister to *me* and it's a whole new ballgame. There's a real outpouring, of empathy from the congregation...a needed opening to more closeness. They are very careful not to intrude on my family time.
- I want to recapture the richness of traditions, but I want innovation, too, especially in communication...people talking *with* each other, not *at* each other. Innovation moves *so* slowly because people have to *own* the changes themselves. I want them to *be* the church...not just have me as a "professional believer."
- I want to work cooperatively toward consensual action rather than imposing order and projects on groups. I don't feel like I have to have the last word. People

should be together in life's struggles and puzzles...with equalitarian sharing...and their own integrity

- I think a leader must be accountable simultaneously as leader and follower. There is no way to short-cut democratic trust building. It's a frustrating slow process. As I ask people to be flexible and to accept my non-traditional ways, I have to show flexibility, too, in using the traditional ways they find comfortable.

And finally, a group of statements that evidence a non-absolutist idea of truth and goodness—an ongoing struggle to integrate traditional and existential knowledge:

- Moral decisions are often a struggle. You have to act with a keen sense of being “in process.” You need to say, “I could be wrong, but this is the best light I have so far.”
- With Jesus you see the God/human tension...the struggle. People use excuses to get off on both sides and remove that tension. A faithful Christian stays flexible, pliable, able to move and bend with varying ideas and ideologies, growing, learning...never locked into absolutism...aware of others...aware of their own responsibility. They continue to struggle with what the faith is saying to them.
- You've got to be a little cracked to take Abraham seriously at first. You look at Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and say, “Why are *they* in the Bible? They could have come up with better people.” They're there because they were human. I wonder, “What am I supposed to learn?” I have to wrestle. There's a wonderful set of questions there. So much is nonsensical it really makes you work. Guidance only comes from wrestling with what's there. It comes.

V. CONVERGENCE OF CLERGYWOMEN'S AND FUTURISTS' WORLDVIEWS

The women in this study, of course, do their conceptual integration of life in an arena (religion) where integrative thinking is the traditional essence. They aspire to authentic self-presentation, responsible caring for life, and mutual trust-building in an arena where all of the above are considered the traditional marks of obedience to God. But they are introducing non-authoritarian, developmental, world-tending articulations of the traditions that shift the ground considerably and open their religious communities to possibilities of participatory truth-building. These women mostly responded to traditional religious formulations and early in life committed themselves to “radical

obedience” to God. Their faith positions are still expressed as radical obedience to God—not primarily (if at all) as explicit social change strategy.

However, their perspectives coincide in crucial ways with the new-paradigm characteristics put forth by important secular futurists and religionists. Whether or not they are aware of it, the informants embody a worldview alternative that seems to be gaining acceptance in some “bellwether” social locations. It is a point of view, for them, rooted in and developed from the women's social experience of being female. Now, at this point in history, it appears to be an orientation needed for balancing world order and for articulating the balance as unity rather

than as power-parity.

Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis⁷ cite Paul Tillich's observation that religious institutions may function as social change agents through exercising direct political power, through offering credible prophetic criticism, or through interpenetrating with society via behavioral models in critical areas of action. Ministerial tasks traditionally have centered on three such critical areas: conceptual integration of the whole life experience (theology), identification of trustworthy moral criteria (ethics), and establishment of ideal ways for people to be in community (administrative leadership). The religious enterprise, and therefore the ministerial role within it, is thus counted on to clarify among people what is in fact so, what's best to do, and according to what social arrangements human life best prospers.

The potential a specific reality paradigm has for dominating a people's taken-for-granted world over time depends on exceedingly complex and subtle social dynamics—most of which are easier to trace historically than to discern in the present or predict for the future. Nevertheless, the interview data shed some light.

Some reasonable hypotheses emerge from the interview findings. The hypotheses are supported *for the seventeen I interviewed*. I must emphasize that for clergywomen in general they are *merely proposals* to be tested for generalizability using other methods.

Interview data allow me to make these simple claims relative to the seventeen informants: Their worldviews clearly lean to the holistic. They show strong awareness of the complex dynamism of modern social change and the need to take it seriously in their ministries, though levels of explicitness vary. They tend to be non-absolutist and process-oriented in their conceptual approaches to truth and morality. The well-being and full participation of persons in social arrangements that affect them is a high-priority consideration for the women. All of them place responsible caring at the heart of their moral commitments. As they talk about intentions for shaping institutional structure, all profess attention to how it serves individual members' needs; most profess attention also to how it serves the world level of human need. They rely on personal integrity, sensitive caring, authentic self-disclosure, and equalitarian negotiation as the primary tools for effective leadership in religious communities. The women regard their real authority as rooted primarily in charismatic credibility—personal influence more than institutionally legitimated power.

⁷Jackson Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair Lummis, *Women of the Cloth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

Since these informants, for the most part, were chosen with consideration for their relative "success" in the ministerial role, and since their colleagues are still heavily male, it might seem reasonable to assume that any bias in gender orientation would lean in the direction of male norms. Some scholars have voiced concern that women may be entering the professional ministerial role as "one of the boys" and suppressing a distinctively female point of view in the desire for acceptance and colleague cooperation. My data suggest otherwise.

The women are, without exception, highly androgynous;⁸ but also, without exception, they appear conventionally (or, more accurately, epi-conventionally⁹) female in *primary* orientation toward life, knowledge, values, relationships, and vocational pursuits. More importantly for the concerns of the study, they place high priority on inclusiveness of human

variety—wholeness in experience—a balanced attention to the multiple forms of human expressiveness, of which gender polarity is an instance.

Given the growing conviction of many futurists that there is worldwide need for a new and more realistic way of thinking about life in modern society, and that the way must be a more dynamic, integrative perspective, the informants appear well-suited to articulate in their ministries the *yin* qualities identified as presently undeveloped, undervalued, and undernoticed; and also to articulate the crucial valuing of wholeness and balance itself in social arrangements.

Other types of study will be needed to describe the complex dynamics of culture shift as it may unfold. I claim nothing more than that, based on my evidence, clergywomen may be uniquely situated to provide an important piece of the action, should the proposed new culture integration come to pervade modern consciousness in U.S. society.

Women such as these informants are in a spectacularly visible location for modeling new ways to be in the world, in faith, in relationships, in marriages, in parenting, in authority, in vocation, in ministry, in community, in conflict, in learning, in growth—as people and as women. And the commonalities in the ways these seventeen women look at life and think of their ministries coincide remarkably with major aspects of the worldview favored by many social thinkers as appropriate to the reality of our modern age.

⁸I use the term “androgynous” here to describe persons characterized by responses appropriate to situations and needs, without rigid restriction of options according to sex. I do not mean some arbitrary neutering of gender distinctions.

⁹“Epi-conventionally” implies development through and beyond the narrowly typical gender expectations—the transcendence of certain distortions and constraints from relatively exclusive, conventional female orientation.