Catholic Gender Denial

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This lively set of essays makes a relatively simple but very important collective point that has widespread theo-political implications. The focus is on the Vatican's hair-on-fire approach to 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory', specifically, the generalized denial at the institutional level of obvious advances in the field. The results range from innocuous to deadly as church officials seek to stem the tide of a changing anthropology upon which their increasingly outdated theology is based.

This is not the first time the Roman Catholic Church has hidden its collective head in the sand. Galileo in the 17th century is an obvious case that took centuries to undo. If the stakes were not so high, I would be tempted to ignore the whole matter. But since young people still kill themselves because of institutional Roman Catholic Church teachings, and because some legal systems are based on this erroneous theology, it is incumbent on responsible scholars to explore and attempt to change this denial into an embrace. I applaud the scholars in this collection for doing just that.

Apparently, the growing biological and social scientific consensus in favor of the broad range of ways in which human beings live out their gender identity and sexuality is simply too hot for the Catholic hierarchy to handle. It undermines the fragile and indefensible sexist and heterosexist anthropology on which the Roman Catholic house of cards is built. Claims that male supremacy and heteronormativity are given in the cosmos are hard to dislodge. Moreover, the challenge to scholars is that ideology has moral and policy implications given the continued, if lessened, impact of the institutional church around the world.

Insights into sex and gender put to rest the long-held claims about natural law that are meant to be conversation stoppers in kyriarchal Catholic ethical discourse. Once that foundation is shattered, it is a short route to dismantling the top down, male over female, heterosexual over homosexual, hierarchical dualism that undergirds so many laws and customs throughout the world. I understand why Vatican officials are worried and they have every reason to be. They are simply on the wrong side of human history. New self and collective understandings could benefit from careful ethical considerations and deep encouragement to embrace the human variety we now know is normative. But the deep spiritual and ethical resources of Catholicism are lost in the scramble to

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preserve outmoded notions of gender and sexuality, and, by extension, to shore up disappearing intellectual market share.

Mary Anne Case offers a helpful analysis of how gender complementarity crept into Catholic theology albeit quite a bit later than its proponents would have the public think. I agree with her conclusion that Pope Francis is unlikely to change any of it given his track record. Lifting up women as 'special', as if doing so were all that is needed to right the balance, is a trap. It is part of an old strategy to put women on a pedestal as a way to contain our power. Ironically, the 'special genius of women' is touted at the same time when gender theories make clear that we do not know what a woman is anymore. At best, it is an empty compliment, at worst a trivializing ruse.

Eric Fassin lays out the French case, which can be seen replicated in Italy and other parts of the world. Sara Garbagnoli adds more data to explain how the term 'gender theory' and related rhetorical devices play for the Vatican. The Argentine cases explained by Mario Pecheny, Daniel Jones, and Lucía Ariza show the pivotal role of Pope Francis, then Jesuit Mario Bergoglio, in efforts to keep abortion and marriage equality out of Argentine society. In his capacity as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, the future pope opposed marriage equality. Eventually, seeing the handwriting on the wall, he indicated tepid agreement with civil partnerships. So much for ideological commitments to oppose gender changes when power is eroding. In other words, the discourse is only as powerful as the integrity behind it, which often isn't much.

One need only recall the manipulation of the word 'feminism' by the Vatican to see the pattern here. First Catholic officials rejected 'feminism', then as feminism gained traction in the world they vilified it (the 'f' word), and finally, they co-opted it into 'Christian feminism' with careful caveats against feminists who are lesbians and those who support reproductive justice. The same dynamic is playing out with 'gender'. At first Vatican officials ignored or perhaps did not know what it was; they probably did not know about theorist Judith Butler until it was too late! Then, as the influence of gender theories spread they turned to vilifying it as described in these essays. I predict that we are a short step away from their take on 'Christian gender' rhetoric that will affirm the gender binaries as eternally given, reject trans everything, and reaffirm heterosexual hegemony.

What I find most astonishing is that data play no role in the construction of theory for those who oppose advances in sex/gender. Somehow, despite heavy reliance on scientific data in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis' well-received encyclical on the environment and human ecology, the same rigor is absent from the sex/gender conversation. Neither social nor physical scientific studies are taken seriously. This methodological failing is simply disqualifying for postmodern discourse.

Repercussions of this flawed approach accrue inside the ecclesial institution as well as in the civil arena. That puts another kind of pressure on Roman Catholic officials to oppose sex/gender changes. Ordination of women as deacons, priests, bishops and perhaps to be named as cardinal or elected as pope are seemingly in-house matters. But they are tied to the same claim to the natural sex/gender order. If gender bends, so too must ordination. Because jurisdiction is linked with ordination, that is, because only ordained persons can make most decisions in the Roman Catholic Church, changes in sex/gender mean changes in who has power in matters ecclesial. That, finally, is what is at stake in-house.

In a meeting with Polish bishops, Pope Francis lamented,

In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] ‘gender.’ Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries. And this [is] terrible!¹

Such critiques are not without their victims.

One alleged case was in Colombia. After the suicide of a gay teen, progressive people updated textbooks on sex/gender. Catholic conservatives, following the Pope, objected. There is speculation that the failure of the plebiscite in that country that would have affirmed an end to decades of civil war was due in part to the religious right’s opposition to the potentially life-saving books.² They voted ‘no’ rather than affirm anything coming from the government so the war drags on.

The price of rejecting a reasonable consensus among scholars can be calculated in lost lives, both physical and spiritual. Clearly sex/gender advances have far reaching implications that church officials who oppose them must live with on their consciences.

¹ <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/08/22/popes-critique-gender-theory-emboldens-bishops-speak/>.

² <http://qz.com/799116/why-colombians-voted-no-on-the-farc-peace-deal/>