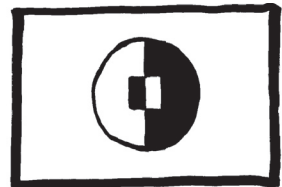
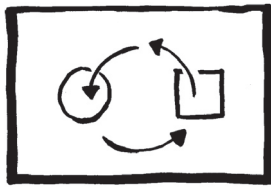
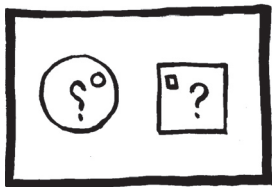


Women in Religion in the 21st Century

Papers from a celebration of diversity

CATHERINE CORNILLE



Encounter, Dialogue, Respect; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

This section features selected essays from an extraordinary conference held in New York City, October 2006. The theme of the conference highlighted the important and evolving roles that women play in different religions and how those roles will continue to change in the future. The conference was meant to be a positive voice to deepen understanding and respect, to promote collaboration and connectivity among religious organizations of all kinds and to provide a unique opportunity for networking among all women in all religions. Additional papers will follow in future issues of Insight.

Introduction

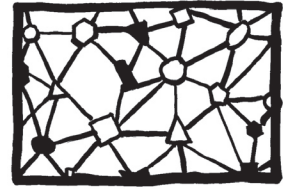
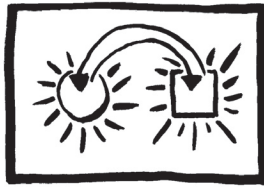
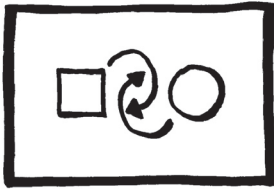
The conference – *Women in Religion in the 21st Century* – was a celebration of diversity, both within and among religious traditions. It brought together women from different religions, different generations, and diverse forms of religious engagement. This gave way to various forms of engaging dialogue.

The religious diversity on evidence at the conference included women from not only the so-called major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – but also from a number of minority religions such as Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, the Baha'i tradition and Shinto. The participation of women from these latter traditions gave the conference a uniquely enriching dimension. Interreligious dialogue often tends to forget or neglect the important insights and experiences of members of religions which have not been granted the rather arbitrary designation of world religions. The presence of highly accomplished women from

Dr. Catherine Cornille is Professor of Comparative Theology, Boston College, USA.

these traditions allowed participants to gain a better understanding of the history and content of their religions and the distinctive challenges faced by women in such minority religions. These challenges are as diverse as the religions themselves. Though the Shinto tradition is certainly based on the notion of gender difference, women have always played

papers and presentations of Muslim women at the conference were of a particularly high quality and reflected the reality of a new generation of female Muslim intellectuals come of age in the West. The conference also presented testimonies of Muslim women who, since 9/11 have risen to the occasion and who have become active in social



Engagement, Mutual Irradiation, Pluralism; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

an important role as priests. The Baha'i tradition, on the other hand, includes an emphasis on gender equality. Women of other minority religions such as Sikhism or Zoroastrianism have only recently come to face the challenges of feminism on their own religious self-understanding. Common to women from minority religions is their sense of divided and at times conflicting commitment to the preservation and the dissemination of their respective traditions and to feminist causes.

In addition to the presence of women from minority religions, a particularly encouraging feature of the conference was the strong attendance of Muslim women, not only numerically but also intellectually and spiritually. There were Muslim women with and without veil, women engaged in political activism, social activism and academic work. Muslim women led participants in the breaking of the fast, and offered a powerful and moving evocation of the meaning of fasting for Muslims. The

causes and in educating the wider public on the nature of Islam. The wide diversity of religious traditions represented at the conference allowed for a genuine interreligious dialogue among religions, regardless of their size or their geo-political importance.

In addition to religious diversity, the conference also exhibited a remarkable difference in forms of religious engagement among women. While many of the women were scholars, some were deeply engaged in religious activism, others in film-making, and still others were religious leaders within their religious communities. A distinctive feature of the conference was the attention drawn to the creative use of the media in bringing to light the distinctive role of women in religious traditions. The documentary "Ties that Bind", for example, follows religious women in their individual and common search for peace and solidarity across religious traditions. It offers a powerful account of the ways in which

women may become role models, not only for other women, but also for men. The interaction between female scholars, artists, and women engaged in social action gave the conference a particularly rich dimension and opened ways of mutual inspiration and collaboration across different areas of women's engagement in the world.

A third dimension of diversity notable at the conference was generational. The conference itself was designed to focus on the commemoration, celebration and continuation of women's legacy. Starting with the foremothers of women's religious liberation and contribution to ecumenism and dialogue in the early twentieth century and continuing with various assessments of the changed roles of women at the end of that century, the conference concluded with voices from a new generation of women who appear to sit more comfortably in both their gender and religious identities. While some of these young women are still blazing new trails within their religious and ethnic communities, they radiate a sense of genuine self-confidence and purpose, and an absence of fear in pursuing their goals. Between the foremothers and this new generation of women lies a century in which women have gained access to education at the highest levels and have come to assume a freedom of choice in religious or professional vocation unimaginable to their religious foremothers.

The challenges to women in religions are by no means overcome. Some young women present at the conference belong to traditions which have hardly become aware of the feminist critique of religion, and others belong to religions for

which feminist concerns pale compared with other challenges of the preservation of the tradition in the modern world. Dialogue between women of these different generations offered new insight into the distinctive concerns and challenges of this new generation of women, while also reminding the new generation of the struggles of the past, and the need for vigilance against ways in which patriarchy seems to constantly reinvent itself.

In spite, or because of these differences between religions, generations and forms of religious engagement, the conference was characterized by a strong sense of solidarity and friendship among participants. And despite the continuing challenges, it mainly focused on the celebration of women's legacy. Though women in most religions still face what has come to be called "a stained glass ceiling", the conference focused mainly on the radical changes that have taken place in the religious life of women in the past century, and particularly in the past three decades. With a new generation of creative and committed religious women, there is every reason for optimism and hope that women will indeed continue women's legacy and transform the face of their distinctive religions.