

*Vanguards of the Faith: Women and Religious Agency in the Catholic Charismatic  
Renewal Movement in Trinidad 1970 - 2010*

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Abstract

Roman Catholic teaching developed since Vatican II (1962 – 1965) enunciates that Jesus Christ established and ordained a male clergy through his appointment of twelve male disciples. Predicated on this, Roman Catholic women over the epochs have been denied ordination and access into positions of spiritual authority. In the island of Trinidad however, it has been observed that women have created a unique space for agency that has been seldom a focus of theoretical inquiry. This has been achieved through the emergence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (1971), a spirit filled upsurge that revived the entire Church. Through the establishment of powerful prayer ministries, women were the founders of a new “female centered” spiritual wave; they were all pioneers establishing their own Renewal Communities, and in many instances singlehandedly administering spiritual affairs. This paper is a subset of the Thesis entitled - Zelophehad’s Daughters: Women in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Trinidad 1970 - 2010. It will seek to address the notion of the possible creation of a new spiritual space of female empowerment within the Roman Catholic Church. Is this new autonomous space created by women for women, independent of a feminist agenda or are there unspoken hopes for equality? Using Feminist Theology as its theoretical foundation, this research will attempt to examine whether or not these women through the Charismatic Renewal Movement have created a female centered empowerment enclave that parallels with the mainstream hierarchical leadership structure that is characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church.

**Keywords:** Agency, Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, Empowerment, Feminist Theology, Interpretative Phenomenology

## Introduction

European Feminist Historian Merry Weisner, has noted in her writings that the rise of second-wave feminism re-invigorated an interest in women's histories, paralleling a similar interest during and following the era of first-wave feminism (2008, pp.2). She goes further to state that during the 1930s, there was a movement away from an attentiveness to "political developments, diplomatic changes, and major intellectual movements" in history, "to investigating the lives of mere ordinary people" (2008, pp.1). By the turn of the 1960s there was an even more drastic development whereby feminist were now addressing women's issues related to gender, class and race. This was subsequently followed by a revisionist approach that attempted to rewrite women's stories and rightly position their voices in the 1980s. Assuredly, this was a revolutionary academic occurrence whereby women who were once considered to be invisible, insignificant beings were now being given the opportunity to tell their stories, assert their voices and be written into history.

Within the patriarchal Christian tradition, biographies were emerging chronicling the lives of prolific women such as St. Theresa of Avila, and Anne Hutchison (Henriksen 2012). As a feminist researcher I became intrigued about my own local space in the West Indies and was compelled to examine the writings that existed during this time frame about women's lives and their contributions. It then came to my attention that very little had been done exploring the role of women within the local Roman Catholic Church. The question to be asked was: Were these women inactive "benchwarmers" that played little to no role in the happenings of the Church or did they too, have the unfortunate experience like so many others, of being written out of the history?

By probing into the role of women in the Caribbean religious sphere, one thing stood out. For the women affiliated with West African Spiritualism the concept of the "priestess" was easily embraced – as seen in the practices of Orisha<sup>1</sup> and Spiritual Baptist<sup>2</sup> faith where women hold senior positions in the spiritual hierarchy. However, for the women subscribing to the mainstream belief system of Roman Catholicism, they had to create alternative auxiliary spaces to facilitate their personal desires or "call" toward spiritual ministry. In the year 1970 the Catholic Charismatic Renewal brought inherent changes to the way women were traditionally perceived within the Roman Catholic Church in Trinidad. This movement served to introduce revival of the Church in its entirety, but also played an integral role that positioned them as powerful spiritual voices. This spiritual enclave has provided women with the ability to assert themselves as power houses usurping their spiritual agency in ways that has never existed before, a development that this paper will seek to explore.

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<sup>1</sup> An Orisha is a spirit or deity that reflects one of the manifestations of God in the Yoruba spiritual or religious system. This religion has found its way throughout the world and is now expressed in practices as varied as Santería, Candomblé and Trinidad Orisha, as well as in some aspects of Umbanda, Winti, Obeah, Vodun and a host of others.

<sup>2</sup> The Spiritual Baptist (or Shouter Baptist) faith is a syncretic Afro-American religion which combines elements of traditional African religion with Christianity. Despite the African influences, Spiritual Baptists consider themselves to be Christians. The Baptist faith was brought to Trinidad by the "Merikens", former American slaves who were recruited by the British to fight, as the Corps of Colonial Marines, against the Americans during the War of 1812. After the end of the war, these ex-slaves were settled in Trinidad, to the east of the Mission of Savannah Grande (now known as Princes Town) in six villages, since then called The Company Villages.

The outline of this paper is structured as follows. Firstly, I introduce the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement and its entrance into the island of Trinidad. This introduction highlights the nature of this contemporary religious movement within the Roman Catholic Church and its unique characteristics within the West Indian religious space. Secondly, I assess the concept of agency and how it relates to women's involvement in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement. Finally, I outline the spaces of women's religious reach and activism, which exposes the extent to which the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement offers a liberating narrative and provides women involved with the ability to resist oppression and subordination.

### **Women in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement**

As a mainstream denomination, the Roman Catholic Church worldwide has historically been known for its patriarchal tendencies and the exclusion of women from recognized areas of ministry. This research examines features of women's involvement in this religious faction on the island of Trinidad and how, through the presence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal within the Church, a shift occurred where women became drawn to a new form of spiritual expression. Through the gifting of the Holy Spirit the "Renewal" provided an environment for women to 'free up' not only through their spiritual encounters but also through the opportunities to take up new roles and responsibilities. '

The global Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement as it exists today is the outgrowth from a retreat held in February 1967 of several faculty members and students from Duquesne University - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Many of the students - though not all - experienced a movement of God's Spirit termed being "baptized in the Holy Spirit" which was evidenced by the expression of Glossolalia or "speaking in tongues" (Cordes 1997). It wasn't many years after this *experience* occurred in the United States that the Catholic Charismatic Renewal came to the shores of Trinidad and Tobago in 1970. The Movement emerged as a result of a series of encounters and events in the lives of certain individuals, during 1970 to 1972. In Trinidad and Tobago the pioneers of the Renewal were Ursula "Aunty Babsy" Bleasdel, Rose Jackman and Nora Devaux. It was quite evident after an assessment of the scope of the Renewal during the period 1970 – 2010 that women were the primary figures of this Movement both at the leadership level as well as the support base (National Service Team 1982, p.10). This is a significant development since traditionally men have been the primary oracles of the Divine within the Roman Catholic Church since its inception.

When this research commenced, it immediately challenged pre conceived notions of what the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement had become in Trinidad and the role that it played particularly as it related to the undermining the patriarchal norms that are inherent in the Roman Catholic tradition. The literature review pointed to a significant body of scholarship addressing the issue of the reciprocal relationship between gender and religion. According to Mary Jo Neitz (1998): Religion has for many years been a major institution used for controlling women , while at the same time women have frequently found in those very institutions a possibility for carving out autonomous spaces that have facilitated the discovery of distinctive gender voices for expressing their spirituality.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement through the various gifts of the Holy Spirit has provided an environment for women to 'free up' not only through their spiritual encounters and experiences but also through the opportunities to take up leadership roles and operate in the various giftings of the spirit. It must be noted however that based on an evaluation of the motivations behind these women's experiences it was observed patently that neither the leaders nor the followers identified with or aligned themselves with feminist theology or with the broader women's liberation movement. They make a claim to divine empowerment and for the most part appear unconcerned with current formulations of women's rights issues.

### **Defining Agency**

Agency can be defined as an individual's (or group's) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes (Alsop 2006, p.1). The concept of agency gained currency in the later 1970s as scholars reacted against structuralism's failure to take into account the actions of individuals. Feminist theorists in particular analysed the ways in which "the personal" is always political in other words how people's actions are influenced by the larger political structure. What is critical about the definition of agency is that it may not always be a synonym of resistance. It can also involve complicity, accommodation to or reinforcement of the status quo – sometimes all at the same time (Duranti, 2001, pp. 8).

Agency can be somewhat of a problematic concept when examining women in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Trinidad. At face value it may appear to take on a revolutionary face whereby women are asserting their voices and accepting "God's call" upon their lives, however on the level of dogma, these movements commonly promote patriarchal religious interpretations and structures of religious practice in which women hold subordinate positions and can never become part of the clerical order. This paper will seek to support the notion that despite the limitations of a patriarchal structure these women are still defying the norm and expressing their spirituality in a ground-breaking way. Through the establishment of unique religious spaces, they own their spiritual experiences within Roman Catholicism, and though constrained by patriarchal limitations, they are still allowing their voices to be heard.

### **Women in the CCRM and Agency**

Historically women were allowed very limited involvement in the Roman Catholic Church. For centuries they experienced different patterns of discrimination from being banned from ordained ministry to being marginalization from centralized roles within the Church (Wash 1999, p.295). Since the Church's inception there has been the perception that based on biology women by nature were unfit to lead resulting in them continuing to face the proverbial glass ceiling. Many of them have continued to accept traditional and contemporary forms of ecclesial discrimination ranging from women being paid less to the perception that their primary role should be that of wife, mother and spiritual keepers of tradition and ritual (J Cook). In assuming the control of the Church, men have placed themselves between God and women – disregarding the abilities of the person of the woman and her immediacy with God and her freedom to decide for herself in religious matters. Therefore, there continues to be the disruption of gendered relations in the church determined solely by masculine power

and control (Wash 1999, p.296). Some feminist Catholic theologians believe that the Vatican has shut itself off from the spirit of God in the Church and the Charisms<sup>3</sup>.

Although Vatican II (1962 – 1965) acknowledged women as an essential part of spiritual life which eventually propelled them into greater roles and responsibilities, their inability to access ordination still positioned them in an auxiliary role in comparison to their male counterparts. Many women did take on specific responsibilities within the Church, ones that can be considered quite important to its overall functioning; nonetheless many of these roles were closely interlocked into essentialist notions of womanhood – quietness, softness and virtue. Some of these employments were: feeding the poor, providing homes for the homeless, church keepers, flower arrangers, cleaners of brass, and gatekeeper to the priest, secretarial duties, church cleaners, and social event planner.

Through the establishment of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Trinidad, for the first time women were being perceived as bona fide leaders within the Roman Catholic Church. Although not ordained ministers, these women were the chosen vessels used for the movement's emergence and expansion. Having received the gifts of the Spirit, they were functioning at extraordinary spiritual dimensions, never before seen. The personal call that they believed God placed on their lives propelled these women to establish Renewal Communities, Prayer Groups and Social centres.

When the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement emerged it brought significant change to women's perception of themselves in Trinidad, particularly based on the reality that they were the vessels being used to carry the message of revival, a message that has traditionally been transmitted by "men of the cloth." Some of the areas of involvement that women in leadership positions are now involved in are as follows: counselling, preaching, intercession, discernment, prophecy, lay ministers, lectors, laying on of hands, spiritual formation, Eucharistic minister, para liturgical activities, seminars and retreats. They are also engaged in healing, and deliverance ministries.

### **Mahmood and Foucault on Agency**

A major theorist whose work can be applied to assess the notion of women and agency in patriarchal religious spaces is that of Saba Mahmood's in her writings *Politics of Piety* (2004). Mahmood posits that the women keenly associated with the mosque movement in Egypt "occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship because they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status (Mahmood 2004, p. 4)." The participants of such movements, movements that have "come to be associated with terms such as fundamentalism, and the subjugation of women (Mahmood 2004, p. 5),

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<sup>3</sup> In Christian theology, a charism in general denotes any good gift that flows from God's love to humans. The word can also mean any of the spiritual graces and qualifications granted to every Christian to perform his or her task in the Church. In the narrowest sense, it is a theological term for the extraordinary graces given to individual Christians for the good of others. These extraordinary spiritual gifts, often termed "charismatic gifts", are the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, increased faith, the gifts of healing, the gift of miracles, prophecy, the discerning of spirits, diverse kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10).

exhibit a dilemma for the feminist analyst: “[W]omen are seen to assert their presence in previously male-define spheres while, on the other hand, the very expressions they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority (Mahmood 2004, p. 6).”

Mahmood argues that feminist notions of freedom, conceived as self-realization, rely on the liberal requirement that: "in order for an individual to be free, her actions must be the consequence of her 'own free will' rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion" (Mahmood 2004, 11). Drawing on poststructuralist insight, Mahmood argues that such a separation between an "autonomous individual" and "external" forces like custom, tradition, and social coercion is impossible. She believes that Agency could also be understood as the work individuals perform on themselves to better comply with the external norms that constitute them Mahmood is undertaking an *Inclusive project*, in that various acts that are not primarily motivated by subversive ideals come to be recognized as agential under this reformulation, along with those acts that are as such (Mahmood 2004, 12). She calls for uncoupling the analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism, because feminist scholarship's emphasis on the politically subversive forms of agency ignores other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and re-signification of hegemonic terms of discourse (Mahmood 2005, 153)

Simply put Feminism has sought to perceive agency in a very static form that can only be expressed if it is questioning or uprooting patriarchal foundations. However from Mahmood's perspective, agency can be perceived as a fluid concept that allows freedom of expression in unique ways that sometimes may not visibly interrogate the status quo, instead work around it to achieve similar aims.

The position of Mahmood (2004) can be used to justify the actions of women within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Trinidad. Although in actuality they may be still operating within a patriarchal framework women are still raising to the occasion and using their virtues to make a difference.

The work of French Philosopher Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) can also be applied to women and their ability to express religious freedom within patriarchal spaces. Foucault is of the perception that power must never be taken as a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogenous domination over others or that of one group or class over others. Power must be analyzed as something which circulates or rather something which functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a piece of wealth. He firmly states that every individual occupies various positions in networks of power: mother, father, brother, sister etc. and so stands in multiple positions in the power/knowledge grid (Barker 1998, p.28). Power is therefore not a permanent one way exchange, it doesn't flow from the more powerful to the less powerful, and it circulates between bodies (Barker 1998, p.28). As demonstrated in the patriarchal model of the Church, there is the tendency to perceive power to be at the apex of the cultural pyramid – held by male Priests and Bishops and the least concentrated to be found at the bottom. Following Foucault, power is not predominantly hierarchical but it takes the form of a net like series of relations where individuals circulate through its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.

Evidentially, based upon this assessment although not placed in a position of importance within the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, women can also be seen as having the ability to exercise power in their own way because power is not static but free flowing at all levels.

### **Agency and Sacred Spaces in the CCRM**

The women of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement in Trinidad created a new environment of liberation within the traditional hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. It became a journey of contestation and contention with the male dominated Church clerics having difficulty accepting the fact that women were the main motivators of this spiritual awakening. Applying the concepts put forward by Mahmood and Foucault, it can be asserted that although these women may not have necessarily challenged patriarchy, they have been able to find their own space for activism and ministry. Within these spaces they exercise a different type of power and authority, one that they perceive to be “God ordained” not conferred upon by mere mortals. Despite the fact that this may appear to be a restricted power, these women are still attracting thousands of Roman Catholics both male and female who are deeply connected to their ministry and calling.

To accurately theorize about women’s practices and involvement within the Renewal Movement, Besky’s Theory “The Ultimate within the Midst of Life” will be employed alongside Lizette Larson Miller (1997) and her analysis of women and ritual spaces to assess how the Charismatic Renewal movement has morphed into a sacred space for women to express religious agency. Betsky (1995) addresses the emergence of women’s spiritual spaces particularly as off shoots from the mainstream patriarchal religions that generally project a male voice to a predominantly female audience. His position posits that traditional sacred spaces have tended to have a male form and geometry and sacred rituals within them are most often performed by men, they generally determine and limit women’s access and participation. Despite the historical reality that men have been the creators and voices of traditional spiritual spaces, Besky suggests that women have employed several recognizable strategies to “make a home for the spirit,” and that woman’s sacred spaces share a number of characteristics, variables, and forms which differentiate them from the traditional worship space.

Besky goes on to suggest that because of women’s continued desire to be connected to the divine, they have long established their own sacred spaces by reactivating or re-appropriating traditional sacred spaces, they thereby create heterotopic, contested spaces (Foucault 1986). Through re-experiencing or renaming the ordinary environment as sacred; and by creating an exclusively female space – it creates a loci for spiritual expression, worship, and connection. The Renewal movement used various groups to facilitate women’s giftings. It was in these environments’ that they took on prominent spiritual roles and denounced their entanglements to restrictive traditions. The three spaces attached to the Movement were the Prayer Group, The Conference and the Life in the Spirit Seminar.

## **The Prayer Group**

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (C.C.R.) prayer group is registered with the national led organization of the C.C.R., by the National Service Team. A prayer group exists to praise and glorify God through sharing the life of Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. It serves the church and world through its evangelistic outreach, centred through the Life in the Spirit Seminar and living in the power of the Holy Spirit. The group may choose any spiritual works to serve others through Christ love and power. Praise is expressed in a number of ways: songs, formal or spontaneous prayer, silence, and even applause or shouts of joy. God speaks to those gathered through Scripture, teaching, exhortation, charismatic gifts and personal sharing.

Currently women are the main leaders of prayer groups in Trinidad and they are supported predominantly by women. Bernadette Patrick (Interview, 2009) highlights the fact that through her female centred prayer ministry, The Magnificat, she has recognized that women are suffering from all forms of emotional problems and hurts. She highlights the fact that because of abortions, failed romantic relationships and just emotional fragility, women crave help and support from each other. As such she has been able to rise up and provide strength and counsel. For women, it is necessary to be able to affiliate with and relate to other women, it provides a sense of identity.

Bernadette Patrick highlights the role of the Magnificat Prayer Group:

You know they say with men, “iron sharpens iron” but with women you have this sense of emotionalism, so that within the Magnificat ministry it has really brought in for the Catholic woman a sense of belonging, sense of somewhere to go, somewhere to fellowship that is within the church. It is not a Lion’s Club Tea Party, we totally believe in something and we are sharing our beliefs together and when you bring people of same beliefs together, your faith grows and your faith will be strengthened. (2009)

As they participate in these events women teach and learn sacred things from each other and become accustomed to seeing each other as ritual leaders. They bring to life empowering all – female social symbolic spaces.

## **The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Rally**

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal hosts yearly rallies with the aim of attracting Roman Catholics from all sectors of the society. Heading these rallies usually is Ms. Deborah De Rosia, leader of the Eternal Light Community. Although, these rallies are not made to appeal strictly to women, based on my personal attendance of approximately three rallies over a two day span, I have personally observed that of the thousands that attend ninety per cent of are female. These rallies allow women to actively engage in their faith through prayer, praise, and fellowship. Women are heavily involved at the forefront of these rallies and their messages are being transmitted and respected. These Conferences have played an integral role in establishing certain women as prominent leaders through the spiritual knowledge and prowess that they visibly demonstrate at this occasion.



## **Life in the Spirit Seminar**

These sessions are composed of a series of talks designed to lead people through the basic message of salvation and help them yield to the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The seminars are presented over the course of 7 evenings (one evening a week for 7 weeks). The Seminars are simple, informal and introductory in format, balanced with teaching, personal testimony, scripture and prayer. Small group discussion periods provide an important opportunity for participants to discuss their progress. The Seminars are designed to help people yield to the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives so they can begin to sense His presence and experience Him working in and through them; and thereby establish or re-establish, or deepen a personal relationship with Christ Jesus. In Trinidad these seminars over the last couple of years have been attended predominantly by women and are taught by all of the female leaders mentioned alongside other women and men at leadership levels within the Renewal.

Wendy Jones notes: “Only a woman can understand women’s experiences.”(2009) Based on this it is clear to note that because of these women’s leadership they have been able to draw large female support. It was through these enclaves that Roman Catholic women invited friends and family that allowed the Movement to expand. It was within these environments that female leaders were able to influence others and establish themselves as genuine women of God, called out to do his will. All these women have committed themselves to full time ministry and in most cases have chosen to embrace the gift of chastity.

Lindley (1996) notes that female based religious groups are of crucial importance to women because it provides a source of meaning, activity and fellowship. According to Feminist Anthropologists such environments separate from the home, play an integral role in the development of women’s spiritual consciousness. Through the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement and its focus on prayer groups and women’s support systems, women have been restored their voices. They are able to meet together and discuss their lives with women like themselves, under the guidance a spiritually senior person that can offer advice and courage

## **Conclusion**

While religion may provide a space for women to negotiate, it can also be extremely constrictive, in the context of cultural assertions. Women’s discourses of faith can’t be categorized either inside or outside the faith, however a middle ground can be found. Watson (1996) states that the church through such teaching can create a place where women can hear each other, speak to each other, hearing stories of faith, oppression and liberation, and in this space feel free to express themselves fully. It is the lack of concern for women’s lives that has caused them to move to the margins and develop new structures that are more authentic to their own realities. Using the words of Catholic Charismatic Prayer Group leader - Bernadette Patrick “Hearing the testimony, remember the woman at the well, she experienced Jesus and she went back to the town but she told everybody. Our gifts as women is that we can tell, we can talk and so that’s why a woman was present and saw Jesus at His resurrection, so He trusted a woman to spread the word, she was the first. So a woman go and tell, so a woman goes and tell, talk that what we can do best...”

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