

Irish Catholic Sisters in San Francisco 1850s-1880s: Empowering Women Through the Church

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Abstract

This study examines ways in which Irish Catholic Sisters¹ perceive themselves as religious workers, women, and Irish migrants in San Francisco during the 1850s-1880s. Within the last few decades, historians have produced scholarship that takes on more of an interdisciplinary approach to investigating history from the perspective of marginalized groups. However, there is little scholarship investigating White ethnic groups that were once on the margins of society. This study utilizes a sociological approach to investigate the experiences of Irish Catholic Sisters in the Western United States in order to better understand the contributions and historical significance the Catholic Sisters played in Western development. Using social identity theory as my theoretical framework, I examine how these individuals utilized and negotiated their social identities throughout their mission in San Francisco. By reviewing other scholarship investigating Catholic Sisters in the West, I have found that these Irish women played a crucial role in developing social welfare institutions in California's Bay Area. Further, by examining diaries, letters, and other historical artifacts these Catholic Sisters created, I have found that they utilized their religious identity more than their gender and ethnic identity as a source of empowerment and as a value system in decision-making processes.

Introduction

Many scholars claim women who take on feminine roles and careers are merely accepting subordinate statuses and hindering the general advancement of women. Eric Weisgram, Lisa M. Dinella, and Megan Fulcher (2011) explain individuals holding female-dominated occupations are perceived to be of lower status than those holding male-dominated occupations. Weisgram et al. further argue that gender equality is hindered by job segregation because women cannot access many male-dominated fields. However, this argument severely discredits and devalues the significant role women have played throughout history while holding occupations deemed as feminine. Although the Irish Catholic Sisters involved in my study focused their energies on typical feminine tasks such as childcare, education, and nursing the sick, they also were institution builders. In fact, many of the schools and hospitals these women funded, built, and staffed still exist in San Francisco today. According to the *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* (2012) exhibition detailing the work of Catholic Sisters throughout U.S. history, Catholic Sisters created America's largest private school system, founded more than 110 colleges, developed state of the art medical equipment, and staffed the first U.S. Navy hospital ship in the Civil War. By 2005, one in six hospital patients were treated by Catholic healthcare systems (*Women & Spirit*, 2012). This study examines identity in order to understand how these women both embodied the gender expectation of purity and piety while still significantly participating in the development of institutions in major American cities.

Much scholarship examining Irish Catholics as a marginalized group in U.S. history focuses almost exclusively on Eastern cities. However, almost a third of San Francisco's population in the last half of the 19th century was Irish Catholics (Jordan & O'Keefe, 2005). Therefore, unlike the cities on the East Coast, there were more Irish Catholics living in San Francisco compared with other ethnic groups (Jordan & O'Keefe, 2005). Thus, Irish history in the United States is not as homogeneous as scholarship suggests. Not all Irish Catholics experienced the severe isolation and exclusion that most in the East felt (Jordan & O'Keefe, 2005). Therefore, this study seeks to add new knowledge to the history of White ethnic groups and break down the idea that White and/or Irish

history is homogeneous. By investigating the role of Irish Catholic Sisters and their perception of their Irish identity in San Francisco, we gain a better understanding of how the Irish perceived themselves and constructed their identity in this unique historical period in the West.

Historical Context

During the 1850s, the United States experienced a massive influx of poor Catholic migrants from Ireland, as well as other nations. Catholics in Ireland were the targets of discriminatory and oppressive laws that severely limited their social mobility. Such laws ranged from Catholic educational institutions being banned to regulations outlining the quality of horses and land Catholics could own or rent (Nolan, 2005). Under British control, tax regulations and unfair policies led to the collapse of the Irish agricultural market, and thus, the nation plummeted into economic crisis and widespread famine lasting from 1845-1852 (Nolan, 2005). As a result, marginalized Catholics were hit the hardest and many migrated to the United States in the following decades.

As poor Irish Catholics flooded into cities in search of jobs, they were met with rampant nativism and anti-Irish Catholic sentiment. The Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s was a political group that built their platform around the belief that Irish Catholics were a threat to American institutions and should be deported back to Ireland (*Women & Spirit*, 2012). Facing extreme discrimination once again, Irish Catholic migrants struggled to survive. Thus the Catholic Church began requesting groups of Catholic Sisters, mostly from Ireland and France, to service these struggling populations and develop much needed social welfare institutions (Hoy, 1995).

When gold was discovered in 1848 near San Francisco, men flocked westward in search of instant wealth. However, as San Francisco's population experienced exponential growth, few were actually striking it rich. As the city's poor population was rapidly increasing, institutional development lagged and the city struggled to support its citizens. As a result of this dire need to develop social welfare institutions to aid this growing poor population, Archbishop of San Francisco Joseph Alemany sought out Catholic Sisters to fill this void. Specifically, he requested Irish Sisters due their experience dealing with hostile environments and

limited resources. The Daughters of Charity arrived in 1852 and although previously based in Maryland, most of the Daughters that came to San Francisco were initially Irish migrants. The Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (PBVM) and the Sisters of Mercy were recruited directly from Ireland and arrived in San Francisco in 1854.

Unlike the missions of other Orders in established Eastern cities, this Western mission was regarded as extremely demanding for several reasons. These Orders arrived with virtually no resources for them to start with (Butler, Engh, & Spalding, 1999). In addition, the power structure found within Catholic Orders during this time caused these women to feel abandoned and isolated from the support and guidance of their fellow Sisters. Catholic Orders do not report directly to the male superior in the area in which they are serving. Rather, these Orders report to what is known as their Motherhouse or Central House (*Women & Spirit*, 2012). The Central House of the Daughters of Charity in San Francisco was located in Maryland (Butler et al., 1999). Therefore, the Superior of the San Francisco mission sought guidance, direction, and approvals from this House in Maryland rather than from the Archbishop directly. However, during the 1860s, much of the East Coast was preoccupied with the Civil War. The Daughters of Charity's Central House was extremely busy nursing wounded soldiers and taking care of orphaned children. Thus the Daughters in the San Francisco Order had a great deal of independence and autonomy. The Sisters of the PBVM and the Sisters of Mercy also experienced similar autonomy as both Motherhouses were located in Ireland.² Overburdened with trying to recover from the Great Famine and meet the demands of the Irish Catholic Diaspora, the mission in the West required that these women start from scratch with little guidance.

Facing several different challenges in the United States, I hypothesize these women utilized their social identities in order to direct their actions and build institutions. Being from a marginalized ethnic and religious background, these women were left to make their own decisions in the context of a hostile and chaotic environment. In addition, being women in a male-dominated location, I argue these Catholic Sisters did not take on typical gender roles as they utilized innovation to build lasting institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Social identity theory posits that social identities provide individuals with information about who one is, how one should behave, and how one should evaluate others (Rohall, Milkie, & Lucas, 2007). Social identities are the different categories or groups by which individuals see themselves (Rohall et al., 2007). In terms of gender, if these Catholic Sisters see themselves as women, then they should behave according to what they deem as female behavior. In Western society during this time, women were expected to display characteristics of submissiveness, piety, purity, and domesticity (Lindsey, 2011). In addition, it was believed women did not belong in the social or political sphere (Lindsey, 2011). Instead they were thought to belong only in the domestic realm, focusing on childrearing and homemaking (Lindsay, 2011). However, these Catholic Sisters both embodied the ideal of purity and piety while still involved in the social and political spheres, thus playing seemingly contradictory roles. In San Francisco, these Catholic Sisters built, ran, and funded hospitals, orphanages, and schools (Hoy, 1995). These women held deeds, funded and planned the development of new structures, handled administrative work, and built social welfare systems that still exist (Nolan, 2009; Hoy, 1995). Furthermore, these women also represented the epitome of purity and piety and were seen as subordinate to male religious workers within the Church. Gender identity is thus both a social role with specific behavioral expectations and value systems. If these Catholic Sisters truly did value the belief that a woman's place was not within the social or political sphere, they would not have been so involved in it.

In his study on respectability, Peter Bailey (1979) found that the performance of respectability among different socioeconomic classes in the 19th century varied from class to class. Respectability during this time period would be the equivalent to social etiquette today. He states the performance of respectability in the working-class was situational and that many working-class individuals did not hold the values often associated with respectability of other classes (Bailey, 1979). Thus, there is a separation between the actual fulfillment of social roles and the adoption of a given identity's value system. Social identity theory supports this finding, explaining specific social identities become more

salient within different social contexts (Rohall et. al., 2007). However, social identity theory focuses exclusively on identity performance and ignores the significant impact identity values can play in individual decision-making processes. Intersectionality helps to explain this phenomenon as it argues individuals identify with multiple social identities that all interact simultaneously (Lindsey, 2011). Therefore, individuals do not just develop a personal value system based on one of their identities, but rather draw from multiple identities at once. In Bailey's example, the values and ideas individuals gained from their class identity greatly influenced how they incorporated the values and performance of respectability into their sense of self. For the Catholic Sisters, it seems as though their gender identity is being influenced by additional identities in terms of the values they utilized to make decisions and actions.

Therefore, this study utilizes social identity theory while considering intersectionality and variability of identity performance to investigate how these Catholic Sisters performed different identities and/or utilized them in decision-making processes. By incorporating this element into my analysis, we can better understand how these individuals saw themselves within the context of their multiple identities rather than focusing on just one.

Methodology

I conducted a close reading of several primary documents that include letters written by some of these Catholic Sisters and a journal kept by a Daughter of Charity during her trip to California. In order to examine the negotiation of different social identities, I first looked for evidence of identity performance through the language utilized in these documents. For their gender identity, I looked for any language indicating a difference in power or an expression of gendered language. I then examined the context for which this language was utilized to determine how the Catholic Sisters were performing their different identities. Secondly, I examined any indication of action or decision-making to determine the use of an identity as a value system. For example, if an action or decision was made within the social realm, then their gender identity was not a central value system as they were not remaining out of

the social sphere. In order to determine which identity these Catholic Sisters were utilizing as their central value system, I looked at the justifications for making the decision or action. Lastly, I conducted a close reading of other scholarly research, including an examination of the history of each Order to support my findings. The following sections detail my analysis of each identity and describe how each identity is being utilized and/or performed.

Gender Identity

When examining the letters addressed to male superiors written by Mother Teresa Comerford (PBVM), I found a significant level of gender identity performance. In a letter addressed to “His Eminence Cardinal S.,” Mother Comerford (15 February 1878) begins by saying, “I most humbly by your Eminence to pardon this intrusion of an unworthy child, on your paternal benignity...”³ When addressing her male superior, Mother Comerford displays a strong sense of submissiveness and inferiority. In letters addressed to fellow women, she does not utilize gendered language such as “paternal benignity.” There is a clear establishment of a division of power by gender within this phrase. Mother Comerford calls herself an “unworthy child,” as if her innocence as a woman makes her childlike and concerns illegitimate compared with those of the Cardinal. There is a sense that she is placing this individual on a pedestal, acknowledging his superiority and power as a male superior. Mother Comerford calls herself an “unworthy child” on several different occasions in letters only addressed to male superiors. In letters addressed to other Sisters, even when they are her superiors, Mother Comerford does not utilize this seemingly scripted language. I found Mother Comerford utilizing this type of language almost exclusively in her letters addressed to men. Thus, the situational context of a letter written by her addressed to a man did make a difference in terms of how Mother Comerford performed her gender identity.

On the other hand, when examining the letters Mother Frances McEnnis (Daughters of Charity) wrote to her male superiors, there appears to be no such formal performance of gender identity. Mother McEnnis still reported to her male superiors and requested their approval and guidance of her Order’s activities. However, there is no indication of



strict definition of the Order's rules and regulations. With visible and distinct codes of behavior, it is easy to see why Mother Comerford displays such as formal performance of gender within her letters. Mother

Mother Francis McEnnis, Superior of the Daughters of Charity Order in the Bay Area. Courtesy of Daughters of Charity, Province of the West, Los Altos Hills, California.

interactions as she knew them to be was crucial. In contrast, the Daughters of Charity in the United States incorporated values and conceptions of equality and freedom as opposed to strict rules and status hierarchies found in many European Orders such as Sisters of the PBVM. This would help to explain why there is a difference in gender performance as each perceived her role expectations differently. While Mother Comerford believed a woman needed to formally acknowledge male authority in order to properly make various requests, Mother McEnnis did not view this as a crucial element to creating success in her mission. Nonetheless, despite this difference in gender performance,

Mother McEnnis drawing deep gendered divisions of power and position between herself and her male superior. When one examines the difference between the Sisters of the PBVM and the Daughters of Charity, the importance placed on gender performance to each of these Orders varies. Mother Comerford desired to keep her Order's traditional European structure, utilizing a

Comerford felt in order to fulfill her mission, going through the formal patterns of

when one examines the actual actions of these women, it is found that neither fully adopted the value system of her gender identity.

Religious Identity

Although these women may not have adopted the value system associated with their gender identity, evidence suggests their identity as religious workers was both performed and foundational to their perception of the world. In terms of performance, there was no hiding their identity as Catholic religious workers. Wearing habits and their Order's uniform, these women were outwardly identifying and conforming to their group standards. Even more interesting, however, is how these women framed their perceptions of the world and their own capabilities within the context of this religious identity. Mother Comerford (12 June 1880) writes in a letter addressed to a Sister in the Sacred Heart Presentation convent in Ireland: "He [God] will do all for us if we pray and live in Union, peace and charity."⁴ This passage perfectly depicts the way in which these Catholic Sisters viewed the world through their religious identity. These Catholic Sisters believed if they behaved how they thought a religious servant and Order member should behave, they would be successful in their mission and fulfill their role as religious workers. As a result, all of their actions were decided in correlation with their religious identity. After learning her male superior had been secretly planning to force her Order to make significant structural changes, Mother Comerford (1880) writes to a trusted Sister in Ireland:

Oh! How necessary to lean on God alone... If I have been mistaken, at any rate, all and many others thought we were doing all for the greater Glory of God and the peace and happiness of our dear Communities... We may expect plenty of crosses and contradictions, even from holy men.⁵

Mother Comerford is explaining to her fellow Sister that she disagrees with her superior and stays firm in her decision. Instead of playing the submissive and subordinate role her gender identity would encourage,

she utilized the value system of her religious identity as a Sister of the PBVM. Mother Comerford and the Sisters of the PBVM believed that charity, peace, and success in a given mission can only be accomplished in a particular manner. This perception of how things and people should operate is contradictory to the submissive roles women are expected to play. The Sisters of PBVM and the Daughters of Charity both believed they answered to God first and foremost and thus did not feel obligated to put all their faith into the decisions and advice of male superiors.

This freedom gave these women a sense of empowerment and allowed them to act more independently than non-women religious⁶ who felt obliged to fulfill gender norms (Lindsey, 2011). After arriving in San Francisco in 1852 only to find their convent a mere shack with a few cans of food, one Daughter of Charity (August 1852) writes in a journal:

Once in our new home, we are trying to console one another. Everything looks so dreary, but the peace of God which is within will brighten our future career. Though so many thousands of miles from all that are near and dear to us, we trust we are no farther from Heaven on the bleak shores of the Pacific.⁷

Instead of merely succumbing to the dreary outlook of their mission, the values of their religious identity to trust in God and their own abilities to do His work empowered these Catholic Sisters. Despite the long and difficult journey to California, the isolation from anything familiar to them, and the extremely limited resources they began with, these women believed they were going to be successful as long as they fulfilled their roles as religious workers.

Ethnic Identity

As Irish immigrants, these women faced great hostilities from elite Protestants within the United States. Nevertheless, the recruitment of Catholic Sisters specifically due to their ethnic background sets up a context which these women feel it is an asset more than a burden. Their sense of pride and strength as Irish individuals is displayed in many of the Sisters of the PBVM's letters and actions. It is made clear in a letter

written by Mother Comerford to Cardinal Cullen (31 July 1876) that she views her ethnic identity as a great source of strength and social capital. She writes:

Daily experience proves that we should safely spread our Order here with the unformed subjects who come from our native country not with those trained in other communities, since the necessities of this Country, or rather, Mission demand a greater degree of Self Sacrifice than is required by the circumstances of other convents.⁸

Within this passage, Mother Comerford is expressing her belief that Irish Catholic Sisters have qualities that make them better suited and more capable of dealing with this very challenging mission. If one's view of the world is directly related to the social identities he/she associates with, then this passage indicates Mother Comerford sees her identity as an Irish individual as empowering and positive. Furthermore, Mother Comerford also established an international network between Ireland and San Francisco as she oversaw construction of a school in Ireland to train Catholic Sisters for her mission in San Francisco. This decision clearly comes from the way she perceives her ethnic identity. Although this shows the Sisters of the PBVM and Mother Comerford did utilize their ethnic identity as a source of empowerment, I did not find much reference to ethnic identity within the Daughters of Charity. This is perhaps due to the heterogeneous nature of the Order within the United States. However, I do believe further research examining how identity is negotiated within the Sisters of Mercy, who came from Ireland, with the Sisters of the PBVM would add to this analysis. Therefore, I can only say evidence merely suggests these Irish women did utilize their identity as Irish immigrants as a source of empowerment. This empowerment seemed to compliment the value system of their religious identity as they felt they were up to the challenges of their mission due to their ethnic identity.

Conclusion

In summary, each of the intersecting identities examined played a role in shaping the decisions and behaviors of these women. Their gender

identity was more of a situational performance than an actual value system vital to these women's belief in their own capabilities. Furthermore, their religious identity was of central importance in all of their decisions and actions. Both the Sisters of the PBVM and the Daughters of Charity utilized their belief and trust in God as a sense of empowerment. They made independent decisions not solely reliant on male approval. Lastly, their ethnic identity as Irish immigrants was found to be complimentary to their religious identity. They felt that because they were Irish Catholic and had dealt with scarce resources and hardship in Ireland, they were able to bring success to the challenging mission in San Francisco. In conclusion, using their religious identity as a foundational value system in decision-making processes, these women were truly empowered through the Church.

Endnotes

¹ The Daughters of Charity and other Catholic Sisters today do not use the term “nun” to refer to themselves, thus a Catholic Sister refers to a member of either the Daughters of Charity or the Sisters of Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

² Due to time limitations during the data collection process and the dispersed locations of the Order's archives, this study only focuses on the Daughters of Charity and Sisters of the PBVM. While the Daughters of Charity and the Sisters of the PBVM are still located in the Bay Area, The Sisters of Mercy, relocated from their initial location in San Francisco to the city of Auburn near Sacramento.

³ Letters written by the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary are located at the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archive, 281 Masonic Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94118-4416.

⁴ Letters written by the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary are located at the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archive, 281 Masonic Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94118-4416.

⁵ Letters written by the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary are located at the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archive, 281 Masonic Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94118-4416.

⁶ Women religious refers to a Catholic Sister (*Women & Spirit*, 2012).

⁷ Letters and diaries written by the Daughters of Charity are located at the Daughter of Charity-Province of the West Archive, 26000 Altamont Road, Los Altos Hills, CA 94022.

⁸ Letters written by the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary are located at the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archive, 281 Masonic Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94118-4416.

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