

Catholicism and Machismo: The Impact of Religion on Hispanic Gender Identity

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Masculinity is strictly a cultural concept. Each society interprets and applies arbitrary gender definitions differently. This study will make a distinction between cultural masculinity and biological maleness. Gender disparity, he will argue, is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and remains the basis for feminine and masculine gender stereotypes in Spanish speaking Latin America. Mary, as virgin and mother, represents the sole role model for Hispanic women, while the male identity will be traced to Adam, Joseph and Catholic priesthood with the church as ultimate wedded partner. In addition, the Spanish conquest influenced male gender identity in Latin America. The small physique of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, combined with the loss of land to the Spaniards questioned the social identity of the male. In order to compensate for their military inferiority and physical weakness, indigenous males developed an elaborate system of masculine behaviors, in short machismo. Simultaneously, the acceptance of Catholic doctrines replaced the natural biology of men and women. This study will analyze the social impact of Hispanic gender identity as interaction between Spanish conquest and Catholic doctrine.

Keywords: Catholicism, Machismo, Hispanic Gender Identity

Introduction

Masculinity, although associated with biology, is strictly a cultural concept. Each society has its own application of “cultural meanings and the biological realities of gender difference” (Kalbian, 2005, p. 9). With a focus on men, this study will make a distinction between cultural masculinity and biological maleness, a distinction that has been blurred by religion. The interplay, exclusion, or complementation of both gender realities will be at the center of this analysis, as well as the impact of Catholicism on Hispanic gender identity. Since the 1960s scholars, such as R.W. Connell, R. Adams and D. Savran, S. Bardo, D. Buchbinder, M. Kimmel, among others, have written extensively about masculinity. Until then, male privileges, mostly granted by religious ideologies, had not been questioned successfully. One of the first gender studies in the Hispanic world was conducted in Puerto Rico in the 1950s by Steward (1956) who laid the foundation for a more complex understanding of Hispanic female gender roles, as they become permeable with education. Vazquez-Nuttall (1987) provides an excellent overview of the existing research in the fields of psychology and sociology. The Catholic roots of gender identities in the Hispanic world, however, remain largely

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unexplored.

Discussion

The duality of a male and a female existence is at the core of every society and religion. The cultural application of masculinity is intricately connected to the concept of woman; like men, women are subjected to an elaborate apparatus of social conventions. The feminine identity is based on female biology and therefore naturally evident. Men, however, define themselves in social and economic terms, in other words, the male biology is excluded from the social arena. Masculinity becomes culturally self-referential, or men become men, when other men say so. For Irwin (2003), maleness implies physical characteristics, which has been marginalized in defining men socially. Masculinity, Irwin argues, is a learned or acquired behavior. If masculinity is not a natural phenomenon, then, according to Saez (2009), it must be learned from others as “gender role socialization” (p. 116). Being female, however, simply follows nature. This fact has served as foundation for the social reality of women. Indeed, societies assign women mostly biological roles, such as mothers, whereas men developed a system of social dominance.

While the mechanism of suppression between genders is the same in all patriarchal societies, in the West male dominance is based on Judeo-Christian theologies. Consequently, the first book of female submission is Genesis. In the beginning “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him...”; “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’”. God’s biological understanding of Eve serves as justification for the restrictions of women within the Catholic Church and Latin America. Jesus’ selection of only men as disciples, according to Stewart, remains the theological legitimization for keeping women excluded. Reading the Bible verbatim, they understand that men are made in the image of God, and they are therefore granted privileges. Women, on the other hand, inevitably became symbols of sin and sensuality.

A solid body of research on gender and Hispanic masculinity has been created; however, in order to capture current and general gender perceptions, this study also includes popular voices outside the academic arena, such as the blogger Marcel. In a recent post on “Creative Minority Report” Marcel (2010) puts the end of a God given masculine dominance in a Biblical perspective:

Adam was given the commission by God ‘to cultivate and care for’ the Garden of Eden and all that was in it (Gen 2, p. 15). Adam messed up soon after. He fails to protect his wife, because he is a coward. He then blames his wife and in doing so he relinquishes his masculinity. Notice that after giving up his masculinity he quickly falls into lusting after his wife, which is why they have to cover themselves—to protect themselves from the lust of the other (para. 3).

Marcel’s argument is essential for defining a basic male-female gender social model: Adam does not take responsibility for his action of eating the apple; instead, he blames Eve for giving it to him. Blaming Eve is a basic gender mechanism in orthodox Judeo-Christian societies, in which Eve’s action serves as justification for suppressing women. Eve, so it seems, is seen as a temptress and the bearer of sin, whereas Adam becomes the victim of her evil action. Such moral judgment has fundamental ramifications for all aspects of life, in which women are presented with fewer legal, social, and economic opportunities and rights. As long as these ideologies are core values of a secular society, women, although unspoken but perhaps subconsciously, will be associated with evil. Adam remains in control, but with the lack of responsibility for his actions, according to Marcel (2010):

“The modern man has also relinquished his masculinity by failing to have self-control. The modern man is an emasculated macho fool who has given in to his pornified passions and lives a sterile and contracepted life—he bears no fruit, literally and figuratively” (para. 4).

Biblical references aside, gender roles had not changed drastically for centuries. Aglialoro (2009) sees the downfall of male dominance in a social movement that began in the 1960s. “In families there emerged a widespread rebellion against ‘paternalistic’ authority. Priests and religious strove for softer, more ‘pastoral’ approaches”. They find this softer, less authoritarian Catholicism reflected in the current Pope Francis who has become actively involved in the fate of the young and the poor. Before exploring male roles within the Hispanic culture, it is necessary to analyze social models for Hispanic women.

Hispanic femininity is based on Mary, the virgin and mother, and Catholicism in Latin America puts a special emphasis on the Virgin Mary. For Morales, the Virgin Mary is “a mediator between individuals, groups, nations and God” (Morales, 1994, p. 193), in other words, Mary is the mother of the entire Latino civilization. Ortiz calls this concept Marianismo. Ortiz (2012) argues that:

“Marianismo is a female corollary to machismo, and it is a cultural or religious description of the ideal woman as self-abnegating mother. This concept is explained by the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the ideal symbol of virgin and mother” (para. 8).

Despite the elimination of sexual pleasure, Christianity offered women social gratification, albeit only as mothers and, post-defloration, as chaste wives and bearers of those traditions that limit them. Ortiz (2012) notes that Marianismo “exalts femininity and childbearing capacity by emphasizing women’s fated long-suffering or *hembrismo*, as well as the qualities of obedience, submission, fidelity, meekness, and humility” (para. 8). Hispanic femininity is socially reduced to biology, as the term *hembra* suggests. The term *hembra* provides the following meaning: “biological female or colloquial woman”. The definition in Spanish is more complex, “1. Convicción estereotipada de que los varones son inferiores a las mujeres por naturaleza. 2. Comportamiento que refleja esta convicción”. Unlike sociology, biology defines females as superior to males. Hispanic stereotyped behavior, however, is based on conviction and convention.

Overall, gender identity is not only based on culture, but also on ethnicity. Several blog sites randomly list attributes for masculinity with implied racial connotations. Laurentood91(2012) associates: “breadwinner, powerful, tough, confident, strong” with a Caucasian male, while Hispanic men are: “smooth, jealous, confident, macho, sexual”. It is important to point out that Laurentood91’s description reduces the Hispanic male to a sexual and emotional object. The blogger utilizes the terms “smooth and sexual” while simultaneously including “jealous and macho”, which are hyper-male aggressive traits that Hispanic males must exhibit, in order to counterbalance their soft, sexual, and feminine perception.

Whereas the Hispanic male exudes sexuality, the Caucasian male has lost his association with sexuality. It seems that he is assigned the role of breadwinner and confident to his female mate. The Judeo-Christian gender role model presents three female archetypes: Lilith, Eve, and Mary. The Biblical Adam had made a choice against the sexual Lilith, as described in the Jewish Kabbalah, in favor of Eve, a woman he could have presented proudly to his own mother. Lilith, the whore, is replaced by Eve, who might have been a whore before the Fall, but is transformed into a mother after the Fall. The Virgin Mary, eventually, ascends to virgin motherhood, eliminating any hint of sexuality, a concept they previously encountered as Marianismo. Marianismo is hostile to female sexuality, since Mary can only experience the pain of childbirth without the

pleasure of orgasm. Female genital mutilation is the extreme social practice of denying women the right to sexual pleasure.

On the other hand, Adam exchanged his biological maleness for a social masculinity. At least Adam experienced shameless sexuality with Lilith, the whore and a pre-Fall Eve as whore. Joseph is left with his sexual, virgin mother, girlfriend Mary. But Mary, with her the Catholic female prototype, is not only virtuous or asexual, she must also be naturally pious and obedient, as the blog for Dallas area Catholics reassures: “A masculine presence tends to imply strength and resolution, while the feminine often implies consensus and striving to get along” (tantamergo, 2012). Men, according to Brannon (2005), “were not naturally as religious and thus not naturally as virtuous as women” (p. 161). The natural inability to be virtuous allows men to seek a more sexual and libidinal existence, often in the socially accepted, even encouraged, extramarital affairs, in which men prove their virility. This social model neatly separates virgin wife, who had transformed herself into a sexless mother, and the extramarital girlfriend or *novia*, who serves as whore.

The socially prescribed gender roles for women are equally simple: the biologically defined female invites Hispanic women to regain a pre-Fall sensuality. If unmarried, she is permitted to emulate a tempting, seductive Eve in high heels, micro miniskirts, and a deep cleavage. Male Hispanics answer to that temptation by showing their primary sexual characteristics, such as hairy chest, mustache, and tight pants to other competing males. The pleasure of premarital play of sensuality, however, comes at a price for Hispanic women who are relegated to Biblical conventions, once deflowered. In the Hispanic social model, marriage mirrors the Fall, in which the woman transitions from innocent virgin to fertile mother. Unlike the pre-Fall Eve, the Hispanic woman is not permitted to enjoy sexuality without the purpose of procreation, hence the necessity of the *novia* for the husband.

Monogamy and chastity are the price devout Catholic women have to pay for social acceptance as virgin mothers, by negating the pleasure of sex and by preserving the power of the hymen, as their most valuable social contribution. The woman’s exchange of virtue for social acceptance and power is based on marriage as a social institution. Women relinquish chastity, in order to gain their husband’s name and entry into a different caste or social class, while documenting their newly acclaimed status with an engagement ring that reflects their husband’s economic status. Husbands, through marriage, gain social stability, and the continuation of his name through his children. Consequently, Adam, who is partnered with the post-Fall mother Eve, has to transfer his sexuality into pornography and the fading memory of his sexual ex-partner, Lilith. But as Mary, the virgin mother and ultimate generation of female Hispanic gender models, ceases to be the object of sexual lust, Joseph is left without a pornofied version of femininity, such as the whore, who cannot be virgin and should not be mother. Similar to the pre-Fall Adam, the Hispanic male enjoys two aspects of sexuality, albeit not with the same woman: social stability and procreation with his wife, and shameless, pre-Fall sexuality with his *novia*.

The economic reality for both genders is that women validate themselves through multiple childbirths. In disadvantaged societies these women tend to be less educated and economically handicapped. Studies by Zeff (1982), Vazquez-Nuttall (1987), Saez (2009), and others, have documented that upward mobility is related to a less traditional or ethnic identification and a less conservative gender interpretation. A higher degree of education, economic stability, and sub-urbanization is key elements in emulating fewer normative social patterns. These social conventions are just as rigidly applied to Hispanic women as to men, leaving men little choice but to become a macho. Ortiz provides a comprehensive summary of the origin of machismo, which led “into a complicated code of chivalry and male honor” (Ortiz, 2012). The website dictionary answers.com defines

machismo less favorably: “Machismo is that exaggerated sense of masculinity in men that focuses on virility, male aggression, and the domination of women”. The complexity of this term demands further investigation.

Through studies and interviews, scholars have been able to present a varied and detailed analysis of machismo as a social foundation for Hispanic masculinity. Mirandé (1997) has traced some origins of machismo to the Mexican pre-colonial Aztec culture, and the dichotomous colonial culture of the conquistadors and caballeros. The Aztec man, according to Mirandé (1997), defined himself in terms of warrior and provider. Once he lost the war to the Spanish conquistadors, his arbitrary social role was seriously diminished (Mirandé, 1997, p. 49). Moreover, to the robust, hairy, and bearded Spaniard the Aztec male, with his soft brown features and his petite, hairless body appeared feminine. Defeat and appearance of the Aztec male questioned the arbitrary male social model, and social elements of over-compensation needed to be created, in order to establish the social dominance of the Hispanic male.

The quintessential understanding of masculinity in the Hispanic world seems anchored in the Catholic Church, rather than in the loss of an empire to the Spanish invaders. After the victory of the conquistadors in Latin America, pre-colonial gender identities were gradually replaced with colonial ones. The identity of the indigenous male shifted effectively from biological maleness to socially defined masculinity. Unlike Africa or Asia, where different colonizing nations, armies and religions had tried to overturn tribal and animistic practices, Latin America succumbed completely to one intruder. Spanish inquisition and conquest, according to Morales (1994), tried to convert and save Africans, but enslaved indigenous tribes in Central and South America. Local populations were isolated, and the same language, as well as political structure, was forced on an entire continent. Moreover, a progressive decimation of the indigenous population, partially due to slave labor and the introduction of debilitating diseases, such as influenza, reduced the number of colonized peoples greatly. Finally, Catholicism was able to include local, animistic traditions, such as the resemblance of the Virgin Mary to the Andean goddess Pachamama or Mama Pacha, into the celebration of this new religion, a mechanism known as transculturation. Matovina (2012) confirms that “Latino Catholics find deep meaning in the incorporation of their cultural expressions and faith traditions in celebrations of Catholic liturgy” (p. 163). Catholic gender identity could therefore evenly be spread and taught across the Latin American continent.

Although Catholicism took sexuality out of men, by omitting Lilith from ecclesiastic teachings, this deliberate absence of sexuality finds its way back on Easter Saturday in very remote indigenous communities of South America. On Good Friday, after the death of Jesus, the cross is veiled in most Catholic churches in South America. During Jesus' absent period, God is absent, and so is divine law and moral. On Easter Saturday some rural Andean villages will fall into a Dionysian Bacchanalia without a Christian codex, as portrayed in the Peruvian film “*Made in USA*”. A similar idea is reflected in the Amish coming of age celebration of “*rumspringa*”.

Sexuality, marriage and monogamy are quintessential foundations of creating social norms and gender identities in any society. The exclusion of sexuality, possibly even promiscuity, might have deemed Catholicism unattractive; however, the symbolic marriage of priests, monks, and nuns to the Church eliminates the need for an actual and physical spouse. This spiritual love for God is taken to a non-biological level by forcing men to not only be monogamous but also celibate. For Kalbian (2005), the church provides social structure, similar to a traditional family, but more specifically as “mother, bride, and virgin” (Kalbian, 2005, p. 5). By being married to a female church, priesthood preserves the social, but not biological aspect of masculinity. The prominent role of the Catholic Church, concerning sexuality, is accepted in all other social

aspects, according to Clutter and Ruben Nieto state that Catholicism in Latin America “has played a significant role in daily activity”. Alexis (2010), a blogger, clearly interconnects masculinity and Catholicism: “Some of the ideas about masculinity get acted upon because it is a part of the religious teachings” . As stated before, Adam is seen as the superior and privileged creature by God. While his role is modified after the Fall, Adam continues to enjoy social superiority. In Europe, the Reformation of the early 16th century questioned the power and the teaching of the Catholic Church and liberated women from Old Testament gender dictates. But the Protestant Reformation never took place in Spain, nor in Latin America, where gender remains deeply connected to Catholic values. The growth of Evangelical Protestant churches throughout Latin America is, according to Fieser and Alves (2012), a very recent cultural phenomenon that has occurred in Latin America after the cultural formation of gender identity. Consequently, medieval gender roles continue to be prevalent in the Catholic Church. To this day, women do not have the right to participate in essential Catholic rites, while women are fully integrated in all Protestant denominations. A brief analysis of the Catholic perception of gender follows.

The Second Vatican Council, which was opened by Pope John XXIII on October 11, 1962, discussed the modern world and Catholicism. Although the Council dealt mostly with interfaith and theological questions, two Apostolic Constitutions, *Gaudium et Spes* and, more importantly, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Dignity of Mankind), became decrees in 1965. *Gaudium et Spes* explains the significance of the church and Catholics in the modern world. The foundation for all inter human relationships, according to *Gaudium et Spes* is Genesis 1:27, and 1:31. In Chapter I part 13, the Catholic Church claims that: “From the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One”. Although Eve is not mentioned explicitly, by establishing a juxtaposition of man, the implication for the “Evil One” becomes woman. Moreover, Part II, Chapter I, “Fostering the Nobility of Marriage and the Family” condemns sexuality outside of penetrative vaginal intercourse, including multiple sex partners and masturbation: “polygamy, the plague of divorce, so-called free love and other disfigurements have an obscuring effect..., married love is too often profaned by excessive self-love, the worship of pleasure and illicit practices against human generation” . The sole reason for marriage and conjugal love is “by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children”. The declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae* makes a clear distinction between man and human person, which incorporates women. But in Part 11 the document only grants men the validity of serving God: “God calls men to serve Him in spirit and in truth, ...God has regard for the dignity of the human person”. Moreover, Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* condemns all forms of sexual activities other than vaginal, conjugal intercourse since “This love is fecund. It is not confined wholly to the loving interchange of husband and wife; it also contrives to go beyond this to bring new life into being”. This document also admonishes self-love, commonly referred to as masturbation. While women are reduced to their biological function of reproduction, the impact of the hormone testosterone on the male body is completely negated. Only conjugal, vaginal penetrative intercourse “is above all fully human, a compound of sense and spirit. It is not, then, merely a question of natural instinct or emotional drive”. This statement rejects any association with a sexual Lilith or a pre-Fall Eve. Sexual intercourse is solely sanctioned, when it furthers the cause of the church, not when it corresponds to the natural expression of human biology. The human biology of the woman, however, with her menstrual cycle is topic of the section “Observing the Natural Law”. While men are to abstain or ejaculate only in a marital vagina, women are subject to a divine “wisely ordered laws of nature and the incidence of fertility in such a way that successive birth is already naturally spaced through the inherent operation of these laws”. Pope John Paul II’s

Apostolic Letter *Mulieres Dignitatem*, addresses very eloquently key beliefs concerning women. The letter returns to Genesis as its base line for justification of the female existence, in which women are: “a helper fit for him”. An elaborate discourse revisits the archetypes Eve and Mary, fertility and chastity, as well as the Church as bride. This letter of 1988 carefully returns modern Catholic women to motherhood, chaste wives, and caretakers. Particularly Latin America has embraced these conservative teachings.

In Western Europe and North America, an erosion of traditional gender roles has taken place, and conservatives lament the erring from quintessential Catholic teachings. Tierney (2010), the author of the blog site “Common Sense Catholicism” voices the concern about modern gender misinterpretations: “The virtues that made masculinity what it is have declined. When they are taught, seldom are they taught in ways a man may find applicable to his life. This needs to change” . Who is to blame for the breakdown of male dominance? According to Catholic gender conventions, feminists are associated with the evil qualities of Eve: “We have witnessed in society and even many circles of our Church the death of the male and masculinity... While you cannot eliminate it, you can marginalize it. On this, give the feminists and the evil one credit: They have succeeded resoundingly” (Tierney, 2010, para. 3). Many orthodox Catholics, such as the blogger Johndigger (2007), claim nature and biology as a God given gender justification:

“We are different, biologically, spiritually, mentally, sexually. Instead of ignoring these differences, they should be glorified in the God-given roles, we have been given. The male qualities are frowned upon, wanting to take the role of protector, provider and leader of our family are frowned upon as controlling, uncompromising and tyrannical. Women naturally empathize better, better at looking after kids, naturally more passive” (Johndigger, 2007).

This Catholic doctrine, apparently based on biology, continues to keep pious women socially suppressed. In other words, men and women who are strict believers will not be able to change a God given gender reality. Not surprisingly, the percentages of practicing Catholics are the highest in Latin America. The Vatican acknowledged this fact by choosing an Argentine pope in 2012, and selecting Brazil as the location for the Catholic World Youth Day 2013, where the arbitrary concepts of masculinity and femininity continue to enjoy a high level of acceptance.

Conclusion

Whereas gender and sexual identity are beginning to overlap in the United States and Northern and Central Europe, as Deaux and Lewis’s (1984) model of gender stereotyping indicates social norms remain steeped in religion in the Hispanic world. Social gender patterns were lifted from the Bible and applied narrowly. Mary, the mother but virgin, functions as the only acceptable role model for Hispanic women. The duality of a pre-Fall and a post-Fall Eve is split into a fertile wife and mother on the one hand, and a sexual *novia*. Hispanic men, who lost the war to the Spanish intruders, must uphold their usurped dominance, by holding on to an elaborate system of masculine behavioral patterns. Machismo, partially born out of defeat, became a successful mechanism to overcome an inferiority complex, the result of the Spanish conquest. Whereas Catholicism continues to celebrate the biological function of women, the male gender identity is based exclusively on social conventions. The succession from Adam, to Joseph to priest illustrates this point clearly. According to the Catholic Church, procreation is the only prescribed form of legitimate, carnal activity for men and women alike. Shameless sexuality can only be practiced with the marginalized whore, but not with the idealized mother and wife. But change is slowly coming to Latin America. Carrillo (2013) argues that hunger for freedom, after the military dictatorships of the 1970s, as well as antiquated Catholic ideologies, forced upon Latin America by a

distant Vatican, have changed Latin thinking. All countries in Latin America now grant a legal divorce to heterosexual couples, several countries permit abortion, and a few offer same sex couples the option of gay marriage. Unlike in the United States, where conservative Christian ideologies are indeed at the core of the nation, Catholicism in Latin America remains an ideology brought in from the outside. In order to include Latin social values, Latin America might turn inside again.

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