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Herstory of Epistemic Injustice: Wo/men’s Silencing in the Catholic Church

Abstract

This article addresses some aspects relating to the intersections of gender, knowledge and authority in the Catholic Church. We will argue that Catholic women have been suffering for centuries gender-based injustices, ranging from inequitable access to theological educational and scholarly work to exclusion from doctrinal development and authoritative knowledge sharing.

This sort of harm has been coined by the British philosopher Miranda Fricker as *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007). She implies by this a distinctive type of injustice when someone is wronged specifically in her capacity of knower, informant, or participant in a community’s sharing of knowledge. Drawing on feminist epistemology and this conceptual framework, we will focus on the injustice of systematically dismissing the voices and knowledges of women. First, we shall provide a brief introduction to Fricker’s work, demonstrating why it lends itself so well to women’s situation in the Church. We will illustrate its potential to help us understand the inner working of the Catholic Church as an epistemic community, where official doctrine has been produced, shaped and authoritatively shared by male agents, mostly members of the clergy. The lenses of epistemic injustice could further contribute to the critical understanding of the role of knowledge practices in perpetuating gendered, oppressive practices. Through historical and contemporary examples, we will take under scrutiny some of the sources and mechanisms of *hermeneutical and testimonial injustice* embedded in the doctrine and practices of the Church. We will also explore their ideological function in legitimating and inculcating structures of domination and clerical hegemony.

Last, we will depict some manifestations of epistemic resistance through the examples of outstanding feminists *avant la lettre* and contemporary dissenters who countered this sort of injustices. We will refer to the significant role played during the last fifty years by feminist theological scholarship and the currently emerging lay movements seeking to resist and disrupt “kyriarchy” (Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1993).

Keywords: epistemic injustice; gender; knowledge; clerical status; feminist theology; kyriarchy.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda algunos aspectos relacionados con las intersecciones de género, conocimiento y autoridad en la Iglesia Católica. Se argumentará que las mujeres católicas hayan estado sufriendo injusticia en base a su género, alcanzando desde un acceso no equitativo a trabajo teológico-educacional y académico hasta la exclusión del desarrollo doctrinal y del reparto de conocimiento autoritativo.

Este tipo de daño ha sido denominado por Miranda Fricker como “injusticia epistémica” (Fricker, 2007). Con ello, se refiere a un tipo de injusticia en la que una persona es perjudicada en su capacidad de sujeto conocedor, informante o participante del reparto de conocimiento de una comunidad. Trazando una epistemología feminista y este marco conceptual, me centraré en la injusticia que supone desoír sistemáticamente las voces y los saberes de las mujeres. Primero, proporcionaré una breve introducción a la obra de Fricker, demostrando por qué se adecúa a la situación de las mujeres en la Iglesia. Ilustraré su potencial para ayudarnos a comprender el funcionamiento interno de la Iglesia Católica como comunidad epistémica, donde la doctrina oficial se ha producido, moldeado y compartido de forma autoritativa entre agentes masculinos, mayormente clérigos. Las lentes de la injusticia epistémica podrían además contribuir a un entendimiento crítico del rol de las prácticas de conocimiento a la hora de perpetuar prácticas opresivas y basadas en el género. A través de ejemplos históricos y contemporáneos, someteré a escrutinio algunas de las fuentes y mecanismos de injusticia hermenéutica y testimonial incrustados en la doctrina y prácticas de la Iglesia. También exploraré su funcionamiento ideológico al legimitar e inculcar estructuras de dominación y hegemonía clerical.

Por último, describiré algunas manifestaciones de resistencia epistémica a través de ejemplos de algunas destacadas feministas *avant la lettre* y disidentes contemporáneos que contraargumentaron este tipo de injusticias. Me referiré al significativo papel jugado por la teología feminista y los emergentes movimientos laicos que buscan resistir y alterar el “kyriarcado” (Schlüssler-Fiorenza, 1993) durante los últimos cincuenta años.

Palabras clave: injusticia epistémica; género; conocimiento; estatus clerical; teología feminista; kyriarcado.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel spricht einige Aspekte in Bezug auf die Intersektionen von Gender, Wissen und Autorität in der katholischen Kirche an. Die Autorin argumentiert, dass katholische Frauen seit Jahrhunderten auf dem Geschlecht basierende Ungerechtigkeiten erleiden, vom ungleichen Zugang zu theologischer Bildung und wissenschaftlicher Arbeit bis zum Ausschluss von der Lehrentwicklung und dem Teilen des autoritativen Wissens.

Diese Art der Benachteiligung wurde von der britischen Philosophin Miranda Fricker als *epistemische Ungerechtigkeit* bezeichnet (Fricker, 2017). Sie bezieht darin einen besonderen Typ von Ungerechtigkeit ein, wenn jemand spezifisch wegen ihrer

Fähigkeit als Wissende, Informantin oder Teilhaberin am Teilen des Wissens in einer Gemeinschaft Unrecht erleidet. Auf der Basis feministischer Epistemologie und dieses konzeptuellen Rahmens fokussiert der Beitrag auf die Ungerechtigkeit einer systematischen Ablehnung der Stimmen und des Wissens von Frauen. Zuerst wird eine kurze Einführung in Frickers Werk gegeben, die aufzeigt, warum es sich so gut eignet, die Situation von Frauen in der Kirche zu beschreiben. Wir werden sein Potential beleuchten, uns zu einem Verständnis des inneren Funktionierens der katholischen Kirche als epistemische Gemeinschaft zu verhelfen, wo die offizielle Lehre durch männliche Akteure, meist Mitglieder des Klerus, produziert, gestaltet und autoritativ geteilt wurde. Die Linse der epistemischen Ungerechtigkeit kann außerdem zu einem kritischen Verständnis der Rolle von Wissenspraktiken bei der Aufrechterhaltung gegenderter unterdrückender Praktiken beitragen. Mit Hilfe von historischen und gegenwärtigen Beispielen sollen einige Quellen und Mechanismen von Ungerechtigkeit in Hermeneutik und Zeugenschaft untersucht werden, die in der Lehre und den Praktiken der Kirche eingebettet sind. Wir werden auch deren ideologische Funktion bei der Legitimierung und Einschärfung von Strukturen der Dominanz und klerikalen Hegemonie ergründen. Zuletzt sollen einige Manifestationen epistemischen Widerstands durch Beispiele einiger herausragender Feminist*innen *avant la lettre* und gegenwärtiger Dissident*innen beschrieben werden, die sich dieser Form der Ungerechtigkeit entgegenstellten. Dabei wird auf die bedeutende Rolle, die die feministische theologische Wissenschaft in den letzten fünfzig Jahren und die gegenwärtig aufkommenden Laienbewegungen dabei spielten, dem „Kyriarchat“ (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1993) Widerstand zu leisten und es zu unterbrechen, Bezug genommen.

Schlagwörter: epistemische Ungerechtigkeit; gender; Wissen; Klerikerstand; feministische Theologie; Kyriarchat.

Introduction

Feminist scholarly endeavours often start with a self-reflective part about the writing or research process, so with this, I will share the sparkles that brought me to this topic and the approach chosen in this article. Besides my rather disheartening lived experiences as a feminist theologian, there have been some specific events unfolding during the last couple of years reminding me that the censorship and silencing of women's voices have been to date compelling in the Catholic Church. I took note of these cases from the media, first in the spring of 2018 when *Voices of Faith*, an international Catholic women's group was hindered in the organisation of an event advocating a more significant role for women in the Church. Since 2014 this meeting has been held at the Vatican yearly around *International Women's Day*. However, in 2018, the head of the *Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life*, refused to approve some of the speakers. The personal

profile and activities of the targeted contributors were showing in the direction of the issues that the Church treats as taboos, non-topics and where usually some form of silencing is imposed: feminist scholarship and activism; pro-choice stance; lesbian and gay advocacy. Finally, the organizers countered this act of censorship by relocating the event to the Jesuit Curia, a few blocks away.

Around the same time, the beginning of March 2018, women's monthly supplement of *L'Osservatore Romano*, titled *Women Church World* – came out with testimonies of women religious denouncing their widespread exploitation as housekeepers for the clergy. They reported that religious sisters were treated like servants, ordered to do domestic work, and even the highly educated ones were given chores with no relationship to their intellectual formation and vocation. This magazine continued to deliver ground-breaking work during the following year. For instance, they played a crucial role in breaking the taboo around the sexual abuse of religious sisters. Nevertheless, after a series of publications revealing the culture of power abuse ruling in the Church, the staff of the magazine has been put under so much pressure that they decided to resign with the whole editorial group. In an open letter addressed to Pope Francis, founder and editor Lucetta Scaraffia quoted among the main reasons a campaign of progressive discrediting and delegitimation directed towards them: “We throw in the towel because we feel surrounded by a climate of mistrust and progressive delegitimization, by a gaze in which we do not feel the esteem and credit necessary to continue our collaboration. (...) Now it seems to us that a vital initiative is reduced to silence and that we return to the antiquated and arid custom of choosing from above, under direct male control, women deemed reliable. In this way, a positive work and a beginning of a frank and sincere relationship, an occasion of *parresia*, is discarded in order to return to clerical self-referentiality.”¹

These and other similar cases brought me to reflect on the hostility proved to date towards women's agency and voice in the Catholic community. It gave me the impulse to analyse how this stubborn bastion of patriarchy with its system of gender apartheid still censors and silences the testimonies of women who take the courage to utter inconvenient truths. Nothing new under the shallow glass ceiling of the Vatican – one could say. Women have been acting as agents of change in the Church ever since its beginnings. Besides, feminist theologians have been tackling the issue of gender inequality within the

¹ Lucetta Scaraffia, *Open letter to Pope Francis* (<https://www.futurechurchnews.org/article/scaraffias-open-letter-to-pope-francis>, 13 November 2019).

ecclesial community already for a few decennia. However, the censorship of women's testimonies, suppression of their voices, and limitation of their roles run to date as a scarlet thread through the history of the Church. Leading and decision-making, being listened to are still privileges not readily available to most women. Even if they represent the vast majority of practising Catholics attending mass daily or volunteering in myriad church activities, they are still barred from most forms of authority.

Epistemic Injustice

Women have been unable to contribute to the processes through which knowledge and meanings had been produced and exchanged in the Church for almost two thousand years. Their voices and testimonies have been questioned, censored or discarded ever since the dawn of Resurrection. Moreover, testimony occupies a central place in the tradition of the Catholic Church, so credibility is a fundamental issue. If only we look at the resurrection narrative itself, which represents the cornerstone of Christian faith, women's lived experience of this event has been officially told, transmitted in writing and interpreted for a long time only by men. Furthermore, women have been unable to participate in the areas which created the official discourse of the Church and its hermeneutical understanding, simply because they were excluded from theologising.

By force of their ordination and the powers invested in them, the members of the clergy have always played the role of institutional gatekeepers of knowledge production and sharing, claiming unique access to truth and its interpretation. Besides, historically, the exercise of clerical powers extended much beyond the institution of the Church, reaching the cultural, social, and political realms equally. Church leaders and the clergy, in general, were by their office in a position to define morality, and thus to influence or regulate practically all essential aspects of women's life – from their role in the society and the family till their intellectual endeavours.

This sort of harm and injustice has been coined by the British philosopher Miranda Fricker as *epistemic injustice*. She defines this situation as a distinctive type of injustice when someone is wronged specifically in her capacity of knower, informant, or participant in the community's production or sharing of knowledge.² The scenarios quoted in the introduction are, in fact, textbook examples of how epistemic injustice operates. Hence, in the following, we will

² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2007).

connect Fricker's theory with the sources and manifestations of epistemic injustice, as well as the practices that kept it going for so long in the institution of the Church. I will demonstrate why this theory can provide an invaluable contribution to the discussions on the intersections of clerical power, knowledge/or claim to knowledge, and gender.

In her theory, Fricker brings together innovatively the issues of power, knowledge, and participation in knowledge production and sharing. Her attention goes primarily to the ethical and political dimensions of processes of knowledge exchange. This is one of the most influential theories to have emerged in philosophy in recent years. The impact of her work has been enormous, and her conceptual frame has been used in many contexts: from human rights issues in general or specific forms of discrimination (based on gender, racial or other elements), in the healthcare context or for the analysis of concerns regarding climate change. Fricker distinguishes two forms of epistemic injustice: *hermeneutical* and *testimonial*.

The first one, *hermeneutical injustice* belongs to the domains of understanding and interpretation, and it refers to situations when due to unequal power relations, some people are denied the access to epistemic goods (such as education, knowledge, or interpretive discourses). Further, due to the lacunae thus created in their conceptual resources, they would also be unable to formulate their experiences and interpret their world. Fricker defines this as: "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutic resource."³ This marginalization has also a direct consequence the lack of active participation in the pool of social meanings.

In our case, although women represent the majority group in the active life of the Catholic community, the ones without whom the pews would be empty, and most activities would be stagnating, until the end of the 20th century, they had minimal access to knowledge shaping and sharing tasks. Male clergy have formulated the doctrine of the Church, and this failed to capture the experiences of lay people in general and women in particular. Women have been prevented from participation in creating and shaping hermeneutical understanding in the Church, simply because they were excluded from theologising or interpreting the Bible. Hence, they also lacked the conceptual means and opportunities to articulate their lived experience.

³ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 155.

Moreover, the official religious discourse has been used to justify women's invisibilization and silencing. The Church as a shaper of morals and social influencer has played for long centuries a significant role in initiating, orchestrating, and conducting the persecution of women who expressed a claim to knowledge. Throughout history, women were judged as not corresponding to gender norms if only they expressed their wish for access to knowledge, reading and studying, sharing ideas, or speaking up in a public context. These gender norms have been regulating and restricting the production and dissemination of knowledge. Anyone deviating from these norms was considered dangerous; hence, persecuted, tortured, sanctioned, or robbed of their lives.

The second form, *testimonial injustice* occurs when due to structural inequalities, a hearer fails to treat the speaker as a source of knowledge, systematically questioning, censoring, or finally discarding her testimonies. Fricker argues that this form of injustice is primarily a matter of credibility deficit, due to the lower status of the epistemic agent or the prevailing negative stereotypes around her person. For instance, those who do not possess a certain social standing are ignored or dismissed, so they cannot participate in the production or exchange of knowledge.

Testimonial injustice can occur in a one-on-one transactional exchange when a member of the clergy does not personally give credit to the knowledge of a woman due to the prejudices deeply embedded in his education or culture.⁴ However, instead, we would rather zoom out to the systemic manifestations of testimonial injustice on a structural level. Due to longstanding patriarchal ideas, practices and implicit biases, women members of the church in general and women theologians, in particular, have been positioned as less than competent knowers. They have been hermeneutically marginalized and their testimonies systemically dismissed. We refer here not only to the silencing of women's voices in the discipline of Theology, but all acts of restricting their access to knowledge, interpretation of their own experiences, and the sharing of knowledge across the centuries. We use testimony in a broad sense, as being able to speak and to be heard, to narrate and interpret, to participate, to dissent and to be believed. Even though these are crucial prerogatives of membership in any community, the lay faithful have been to date prevented from participating in fair epistemological exchanges in the institution of the Church.

⁴ Fricker distinguished between transactional and structural varieties of testimonial injustice, and she focused mainly on the one-on-one individual exchanges.

The Sources of Epistemic Injustice in the Catholic Church

As we said, women's voices have been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection until the second half of the 20th century. Official Church teaching in its current form is the product of exclusively male members. The long history of the development and interpretation of Church doctrine and practice is also a man-made history. Male members of the Church have decided what orthodoxy was and they formed people's common understanding of what orthopraxis should be. They used their authority to limit, dismiss or silence all forms of alterity in attitudes and knowledges. The same way, Canon Law, the church's legislation applying to Christian life has been formulated without any input of women. Moreover, a whole set of canons has been sustaining to date the inequality of the sexes.⁵ And last, but not least, the liturgical language of the Church still renders women invisible. The institution of the Church has thus created, shaped and sustained a system in which women have been denied the status of epistemic agents.

The main strategies of women's silencing were: the non-sharing or unjust sharing of epistemic goods; the unjust distribution of epistemic authority; unequal hermeneutical participation (denying women access to decision-making in councils, synods or acts of public teaching and speech such as sermons). In the following, we will review a few of the historical sources and contemporary manifestations of these specific forms of injustice.

Persisting Negative stereotypes and Suppressive Female Roles

Some of the most significant sources of epistemic injustice in the Church have been the long persisting negative stereotypes and prejudices against women. Our theological tradition has, implicitly or explicitly, provided a negative characterization of 'women' and the 'feminine' millennia-long. Already during the first centuries of Christianity, the church fathers created and sustained such stereotypes about women and their weak, sinful nature. Women were regarded as inferior and weak in both intellect and character. While they perceived men as primarily spiritual beings, women were characterized as carnal beings defined by their sexuality and lust. Hence, the church fathers outdid each other in describing them in the vilest and profoundly dehumanizing ways.

⁵ For instance, women do not even enjoy the full rights and duties of lay people as the role of reader and acolyte are still explicitly reserved to lay men (c. 230). Further, women are excluded the positions of judges in the diocesan courts (c. 1421 §2), all these roles being reserved for priests (c. 1421 §1) or deacons (c. 266 §1).

The patriarchal interpretation of the fall narrative was primarily at the root of these ideas. Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, Jerome – they all blamed women for the fall and the eviction from paradise. They identified women with Eve, who through her disobedience, introduced sin into the world, causing the death of all human race. Therefore, they warned men against these lustful temptresses who continuously reproduced Eve's initial temptation of Adam.

For instance, Tertullian in his *Apparel of Women* referred to women as the originators of sin: "And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? [...] You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die."⁶ So an even more important consequence of the patristic exegesis of the fall was that our theological tradition and more specifically our soteriology had been built around the dichotomy of female sinfulness versus male salvific action. Based on this core myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition, women had to atone for their collective guilt and redeem themselves by the gender roles assigned to them. The church fathers concluded that it was according to the natural order for men to rule over women and for women to be subservient to their husbands.

Further, they based their teaching on women's inferior position in the church and the family on The Epistles of Paul.⁷ A passage often misused in this regard was the pronouncement from the First Letter of Paul to Timothy (1:2,11-14) stating that women were not allowed to teach nor communicate their faith in public, due to their inherent sinfulness and moral corruption: "A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Further, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed."⁸ John Chrysostom, in his Homily IX on this same passage, contended that because Eve sinned, all women were punished with subjection: "The woman taught once, and ruined all. On this account therefore he saith, let her not teach. But what is it to other women, that she suffered this?"

⁶ Tertullian, *Chapter I. Introduction: Modesty in Apparel Becoming to Women, in Memory of the Introduction of Sin into the World Through a Woman* (<http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-06.htm>, 28 April 2020).

⁷ The passages often cited and used as a justification for gender inequality were: 1Corinthians 11:7-9, 1Corinthians 14:33-35 and Ephesians 5:22-23.

⁸ *The New American Bible, Revised Edition* (Saint Benedict Press: Charlotte, NC 2010).

It certainly concerns them; for the sex is weak and fickle, and he is speaking of the sex collectively. For he says not Eve, but 'the woman', which is the common name of the whole sex, not her proper name. Was then the whole sex included in the transgression for her fault? As he said of Adam, After the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of Him that was to come" (Rom. 5:14); so here the female sex transgressed, and not the male. Shall not women then be saved? Yes, by means of children (...) God has granted you another opportunity of salvation, by the bringing up of children, so that you are saved, not only by yourselves, but by others."⁹

The patristic influence on later thinking was so profound that the idea of women's inferiority has been reiterated and reinforced by Saint Thomas Aquinas a thousand years later. Even much later, up to the late 19th century, encyclicals proclaimed the inferiority of women, insisting on the headship of men over women in marriage and condemning as heretics those who taught the equality of the sexes. Trivialized preservations of the Fall narrative persisting to date everywhere around the globe are still caricaturing and undermining women's trustworthiness.

What is the harm perpetrated in these cases? First of all, due to the patristic misinterpretations of the Fall narrative centered around the question of knowledge and access to knowledge, women suffered a significant credibility deficit. They were deemed epistemically untrustworthy, and their experiences, testimonies, knowledge have been invalidated, discounted, or silenced. Hence, also, women's lived experiences of religious life, their understanding of God and faith have been dismissed by the dominant group. Secondly, not being taken seriously as a knowing subject meant not being respected in a fundamental human capacity. The harm and damage incurred were at once moral and epistemological. In this regard, Fricker emphasized that while at instances testimonial injustice could have minor consequences, the harm was growing in gravity when it was persistent and systematic.

An indirect and more implicit way of epistemic silencing and invisibilization was prescribing women passivity, sacrifice, and selflessness as typically feminine virtues. Some of the ways of keeping women in a silent, powerless position are deeply hidden in the hagiography and spiritual tradition of the Church. Men

⁹ Saint Chrysostom, "Homily IX. 1 Timothy ii. 11-15", in: Philip Schaff (ed.), *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (T&T Clark: Edinburgh and Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI 1988), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series 1, 13. (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf113.v.iii.x.html>, 29 April 2020).

formulated, shaped and set the criteria for sanctity and wrote the hagiographies. All through the centuries of our history, the vast majority of female saints canonized by the Church and set as role models for women were examples of endurance, humbleness, and obedience, who kept silent even in the face of male power abuse and suppression. Even the official teaching of the Church on women and their role in the world and the family has been dictating a passive, servile role. The feminine model invoked with consistency to reinforce and sacralize this subordination and passivity of women was Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Hermeneutic Marginalization and Epistemic Labour Invalidation

In most places, women have been admitted to theological training only in the second part of the 20th century. For instance, the Gregorian University opened its doors to women's training in 1965, the first PhD defended by a woman was in 1973. The timing was approximately the same in other Western European countries, such as Germany and Belgium. In the United States, the admission happened a bit earlier, as specific courses opened to women in the fifties. By the eighties, some women theologians were already enjoying a particular position and voice in academia.

In the recent decennia, women theologians have not been so much prevented from the process of knowledge production, as from the authoritative forms of sharing it. Despite the massive corpus of work delivered since the seventies, for women theologians in general and feminist ones in particular, it has been disproportionately harder to complete epistemic tasks. Deeply embedded gender biases have been undermining the credibility of their theological work. Primarily the contributions not conforming to mainstream theological methods and preoccupations, have been disregarded, devalued, and systematically dismissed as not real scholarship. As Foucault's theorizing of the power/knowledge nexus puts it, their knowledges "have been disqualified as non-conceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve ... hierarchically inferior knowledges ... that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity."¹⁰ The works dealing with women's disadvantaged position in the Church or any topic questioning the foundations of clerical hegemony have been harshly invalidated by mainstream theology. Assuming feminist labels in one's publications could imply destroying one's epistemic credibility and all opportunity to pursue an academic career.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, translated by David Macey (Picador Press: New York 2003), 7.

Even after half a century of feminist contributions to the theological landscape, most male theologians, academics or members of the clergy do not show the openness and willingness to familiarize themselves with women's work. One of the theorists of epistemic resistance, José Medina qualifies this attitude as a form of *willful hermeneutical ignorance*.¹¹ He zooms into the characters of privileged subjects and refers to this attitude as a culpable state arising out of a cluster of epistemic vices: epistemic arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness. He calls them epistemically spoiled: "the powerful can be spoiled not only by enjoying in a disproportionate way the privilege of knowing (or, rather, being assumed to know) but also by having the privilege of not knowing or of not needing to know. Sometimes there are entire domains that people in a position of privilege do not have to familiarize themselves with."¹²

Even if the injustice being thus inflicted is not deliberate but emerging from "residual" bias and prejudices inherited from a long tradition of patriarchal views, dismissing the voice and input of more than half of the community is a sign of moral failure. Besides, the effects of the credibility deficit suffered by women can run very deep: if someone experiences persistent testimonial injustice, she may lose confidence in her intellectual abilities to such an extent that she would be hindered in her education or intellectual development. And if we understand theology as more than an intellectual endeavour, and rather as personal "faith seeking understanding", then women might also experience a profound moral dissonance and a real crisis of faith because their community which confesses egalitarian values, is systematically discriminating them.

Scrutiny, Canonical Warnings, and Censorship

Critically inquisitive and dissenting voices have never really been appreciated in the Catholic Church, nor tolerated as expressions of a sincere quest for meaning. The Church has a long and disheartening history of silencing, ostracising, and removing those who raised issues which could shake the structural foundation of power concentrated in the clergy. So, a more outspoken way of silencing has undoubtedly been the exercise of doctrinal authority.

¹¹ José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2012). Medina's account of epistemic injustice departs from Fricker's in some points that can be especially insightful for our analysis. He develops for instance the idea of responsibility of the privileged ones who commit epistemic injustice.

¹² Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 32.

When analysing the meaning and practice of ecclesial authority, we could resort to the theories around regimes of power/knowledge which intersect Fricke's concerns.¹³ Since the 4th century, the institution of the Church had been enmeshed with monarchical forms of power in which church leaders played the role of guardians of knowledge. Throughout the history of Christianity, various levels and forums were set up to monitor and admonish theological work, from local or regional doctrinal committees to centralized ones such as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. These forums were charged with prescribing disciplinary actions whenever they deemed to discover doctrinal irregularities. Church leaders have thus basically determined who can speak and what counted as correct and true. In order to maintain a unitary discourse, the dissenters have been marginalised or silenced.¹⁴

Even in our days, many of women's theoretical and practical preoccupations, such as the concerns for inclusivity and social justice have been scrutinised, censored and silenced by doctrinal forums at both national and Vatican levels. Feminist theologians, religious sisters have been pioneering in areas which mainstream male theologians consider as doctrinal minefields. Women have attended to contemporary human experience and the empirical reality, raising difficult questions about official teachings which seemed at variance with believers' deepest intuitions and experiences. They tackled such issues, lending their voice to the voiceless, the marginalised and ostracised of our societies. As a reaction, they were confronted with investigations and various severe sanctions, from the suspension of their activities and tasks to ex-communication. Such an example would be the investigation of the *Leadership Conference of Women Religious* in the United States, which started in 2012 under the authorisation of Pope Benedict. This scrutiny concluded that the sisters had challenged the church teaching on homosexuality, the ordination of women, and the healthcare reform. Similar action was often taken against the theological work of individuals. For instance, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith scrutinised professor Margaret Farley's work *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (2006) and contended that her theological method was

¹³ Amy Allen, "Foucault and Epistemic Injustice", in: Ian James Kid et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (Routledge: London 2017), 187-194; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books: New York 1978).

¹⁴ Steven G. Ogden, *The Church, Authority, and Foucault: Imagining the Church as an Open Space of Freedom* (Routledge: London 2017).

not consistent with authentic Catholic theology, due to its understanding of the role of the Church's Magisterium, its method and attendance to contemporary experience. Many more women theologians who addressed thorny issues in the fields of sexual or medical ethics received warnings, sanctions, or have been excommunicated.¹⁵

Moreover, as we have illustrated it in the part dealing with the negative stereotypes, Christian theology built on a long tradition of debates and arguments regarding women's moral, intellectual and natural shortcomings. These negative views on women and their sinful nature fueled many forms of harsh doctrinal persecution at different moments in history.

For instance, during the late Middle-Ages women who devoted themselves to different fields of human knowledge, going beyond the limits of the gender roles ascribed to them were regarded as suspicious. As all formal access to knowledge and education was under male-control, women who operated outside the realm of men's authority were perceived as a threat. Hence, one of the strategies to consolidate patriarchal power was to directly suppress and prosecute women who mastered knowledges beyond the control of Church authorities (such as medicine, biology).¹⁶ This resulted in massive violence against female healers, midwives who were all labelled as witches at some point in history. Feminist historical critique uncovered horrendous stories of persecution of women at the hands of the Church through the collaboration of inquisitors (especially in the 14th–17th centuries).

Witch hunts had at their base the previously mentioned prejudices on women's weakness of character inherited from the church fathers and the theology of their times. Medieval theology still saw women as descendants of Eve, temptresses and possible associates of the devil. Besides, the medieval Church had significant power in influencing social ideologies. *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), is just one of the works which illustrate how misogyny and negative

¹⁵ For instance, Sister Margaret McBride, a hospital executive and member of St. Joseph's Hospital Ethics Committee in Phoenix, Arizona was relieved of her position and excommunicated for approving the termination of the life-threatening, 11-week pregnancy of a 27-year-old mother of four. Or, Sister Jeannine Gramick spent three decades building a pioneering ministry to the gay and lesbian community, despite relentless and unsuccessful efforts made by then Cardinal Ratzinger to silence her and ban her work.

¹⁶ For instance, the women who acted as healers in their communities were in the possession of popular wisdom transmitted orally from one generation to the other. The healing practices and the medicinal applications of many herbs and plants could have costed Hildegard von Bingen her life just 200–300 years later.

stereotypes could impact the societal views on women. This work written by the Dominican monks Kramer and Sprenger became the manual of witch hunts. It listed a whole set of typically feminine weaknesses which made women susceptible to sin and an easy prey to the devil. To build credibility for his book, Kramer relied on quotes from the church fathers and Aquinas about why women were more likely to be led astray. At his request, pope Innocent VIII issued the bull known as *Summis desiderantes* (1484) in which he acknowledged the practice of witchcraft and condemned it as the worst of all heresies. The pope also authorized Kramer and Sprenger to prosecute witchcraft in Germany.

Clerical Status: Epistemic Privilege and Credibility Excess

Even though all the elements mentioned before contributed to epistemic injustice in the Church, the primary source from which all of them originate is the two-tiered lay-clergy structure itself. This asymmetry has created two epistemic classes, one of knowers and the other of sub-knowers, which have been sustained to date. According to the official doctrine of the Church, the community is made up of a teaching part (*docens*) and a taught part (*discens*): “In the dominant episteme, the laity made up the *ecclesia discens*, or that element of the church taught by the hierarchy, and the hierarchy existed as *ecclesia docens*, or the teaching church.”¹⁷ The pre-Vatican II neo-scholastic understanding of the Church viewed truth and revelation as coming from God through the hierarchy to the faithful in a top-down fashion. This pyramidal, hierocratic ecclesial model implied that reception of doctrine was perceived as a unidirectional movement from teacher (*magisterium*) to receiver (*fideles*).

Even though Christianity started out as an equality-based community, it gradually transformed into a hierarchical structure, and the tasks initially shared among the members have been later concentrated on the person of the priest. While the clergy received all the authority of knowledge production and sharing, lay people have been placed in a passive, receptive position, and this prescribed a leader/follower dynamic.

Along the centuries, as a result of this epistemic privilege and credibility excess enjoyed by the members of the clergy, a whole set of attitudes and practices had been constructed around priesthood. In order to contextualize the power dynamics operating to date inside the Catholic community, we need to look into the

¹⁷ Mark Kowalewski, *All Things to All People. The Catholic Church Confronts the AIDS Crisis* (SUNY Press: Albany, NY 1994), 132.

development of clerical status itself. A mere glimpse into the history of the Church reveals that during its first millennium, priesthood comprised a more restricted territorial and ministerial jurisdiction. Up to the 12th-13th century, ordination meant being entrusted with leadership and liturgical role for a specific community; it encompassed at the same time election as its starting point and consecration as its term. The term *ordinatio* signified the fact of being designated and consecrated to take up a particular place, or better a specific function, *ordo*, in the community and at its service.¹⁸ This definition has gradually shifted, and by the 12th century, ordination came to signify the investment with an irrevocable power to be exercised in any community in the universal church.

Further, a very potent source of epistemic privilege is the triple office priests are granted in ordination, namely the office of *teaching* (*munus docendi*), *governing* (*munus regendi*), and *sanctifying* (*munus sanctificandi*). Through ordination and the so-called concomitant ontological change they undergo, priests are formed to act as alter Christus – other Christs. They “are configured to Christ in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head.”¹⁹ First of all, the *teaching munus* implies that they possess a transcendental warrant to claim knowledge over what is truthful and right in issues of faith and morals. When they speak in the name of Christ and the Church, when they preach and teach, they do this with an authority that no member of the laity can ever enjoy (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5). Secondly, the priest, as a sharer in Christ’s kingship, can also exercise a *governing function* (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 6–7). The conferred pastoral power covers the legislative, judicial, and punitive aspects in the life of the community. And last, through *the sacerdotal power* invested on them in ordination, they become mediators of God’s grace or forgiveness in the sacraments. As such, if Catholic priests are seen as mediators between God and humans, linking the human and divine realms, their role is utterly indispensable.

The epistemic authority has further been reinforced by liturgical acts and language. The transcendental dimensions of priestly status have been deeply embedded in the catholic public imagination through the discourses, which

¹⁸ See: Yves Congar, “My Path-findings in the Theology of Laity and Ministries”, in: *The Jurist* 32 (1971), 180.

¹⁹ See: *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Lumen Gentium* n. 28 (1964). (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html 11 November 2019); *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests/Presbyterorum ordinis* n. 2 and n. 13 (1965). (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html 11 November 2019).

could reach the faithful (the language of the liturgy, spiritual writings and catechesis). The theologically uneducated lay people were exposed to the essential points of the theology of priesthood every time they participated in a liturgical service. The over-emphasis of the divine selection, indelible mark, the role of mediation between God and humans, and the ontological difference acquired in the order became thus the bedrock of clerical identity and their status in the communities. The elevated, metaphorical language of piety and obedience used in the liturgy obscured the asymmetrical power relations. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that euphemisms and the very abstract vocabulary played a crucial role in the Catholic Church's reproduction of inequality between the hierarchy and the laity. Church officials used this language "to inoculate themselves from the acknowledgement of the real truth of church practices and to convince the laity (and others) that there is nothing arbitrary about hierarchical power and the clerical privilege it embeds."²⁰

Last, but not least, the idea of the priest as someone set apart due to his divine calling has also been closely associated with him as a person endowed with particular virtues. However, this moral authority and credibility are not (necessarily) based on personal virtues, but on the power invested in ordination and the constructs emerging from this. As the sacrament of order would endow the members of the clergy with a sanctifying grace enabling them to lead a holy life, the role of personal morals became minimised or lost out of sight. Moreover, the sacramental powers operated 'mechanistically,' meaning that the personal merit of the priest would not affect the quality of the sacraments conferred by him.

The divide between the class of clerics possessing all the governing power and the laity restricted to a followers' obedient role, resulted as we know in a plethora of abusive practices and unethical behaviour patterns. The overemphasis of ontological difference often contributed to a somehow aloof attitude, the sense of superiority and entitlement prevailing among some ordained men. Besides, the demographic reality of priest shortage has given rise to lowered selection criteria and minimalist expectations concerning the moral, spiritual, and intellectual character of the candidates for the priesthood.

²⁰ Michele Dillon, "The Catholic Church's Euphemization of Power", in: *National Catholic Reporter* 15 (February/2019) (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/catholic-churchs-euphemization-power> 15 August 2019); see also: Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford University Press: Redwood City, CA 1998).

All public revelations of cases of sexual abuse started as a competition between the word of a clergy member to be trusted by virtue of his divine selection and his assumed moral superiority and the word of the victims (be it children or adults, women or men). These abominable conditions could be sustained for such a long time due to a well-established culture of obedience on which the pastoral relations were built. If the priest was the man of God who continued Christ's ministry on earth, he was also perceived as the one who could cut people off from the kingdom of God. Hence, understanding clericalism is crucial for grasping the various manifestations of abuse of power, as well as the epistemic harms suffered by all those who advocated for the discriminated or silenced groups in the Church.

The economy of credibility is a quite complicated issue and a site of numerous intersecting aspects. For instance, today, the members of clergy enjoy quite varying degrees of authority and credibility in different regions of the world. In the Western world, their societal influence and authority have significantly declined already in the second part of the 20th century. In more traditional societies from Eastern Europe to Latin America or African countries, the clergy has been enjoying until recently a quite authoritative role. This positioning has partly contributed to the delayed outburst of the abuse crisis in these areas. If we look at the example of the recent outburst of the abuse crisis in Poland, we will understand that the more traditional Catholic a country is, the harder it is to break through the layers of taboo and cover-up. Even though the cases coming to the light today are at least as old as the ones revealed in other parts of the world much earlier, in traditional settings, they surface with greater difficulty. On many sites around the world, this drama has not even managed to unfold.

Epistemic Smothering and the Culture of Cover-up

Feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson identified a subcategory of testimonial injustice, called *testimonial smothering* when the speaker self-silences for fear that her testimony will be misinterpreted or rejected, when one “perceives one’s immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony.”²¹ For instance, although the first extensive reports on the abuse of nuns in the church go back to the 1990s, the scale at which the reports come up today confirms the fact that most of the victims kept silent for fear of the consequences. Personal narratives reveal that raped

²¹ Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing”, in: *Hypatia* 26 (2011), 244.

nuns did not dare to complain to their superiors, because they knew they would not be given credit or even worse, they would be blamed for seducing a member of the clergy. Cases from India, Africa, and Europe confirmed that those who finally spoke up revealing the abuse they suffered, have been intimidated, ostracized, dismissed from their communities even when pregnant.

Epistemic smothering is the reason why in most cases no complaints or no criminal charges have been filed. The reactions of disbelief and the unwillingness of Church officials to acknowledge or handle the cases of abuse were nothing else than expressions of profound testimonial injustice. Survivors have been searching for listeners among those whose role would have been by virtue of their ministry to support the vulnerable. Instead, they have been blamed even with outright accusations of seduction. Moreover, when a member of the clergy or the entire group invested with significant moral authority denied the lived experience of survivors, they were re-experiencing epistemic injustice. Personal stories of survivors confirmed that the repeated experience of testimonial injustice – being questioned, dismissed, blamed often resulted in new traumas. This was especially damaging to their spiritual lives, causing a crisis of faith and alienation from their communities.

Cover-up has been very much a part of the Catholic institutional culture and the commonly used policy in cases of clerical misconduct.²² The culture of secrecy, internal protocols, the closed circuits of communication such as those revealed in *Crimen Sollicitationis* (1962) enabled these strategies.²³ The explosion of the abuse crisis revealed that the institution of the church protected the clergy at all costs, hiding their crimes as long as it was feasible. The mere acknowledgement of the problems would have meant exposing the system to critique and weakening their absolute power. Under the guise of protecting the good name of the Church, they were defending the authority and sovereign power of clergy; they deemed these as more important than the protection of the most vulnerable or the commitment to the values of the Gospel. On the other hand, everything has been done to silence the victims and their families: dissuading them at all costs from filing official complaints, imposing legal clauses in settlements.

²² Véronique Magron, moral theologian and president of the Conference of Religious Sisters and Brothers in France, uses the term *omerta* to describe this code of silence and secrecy. This term is typically used in the context of criminal organisations as the mafia.

²³ The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, *Instruction on the Manner of Proceeding in Causes involving the Crime of Solicitation*, (Vatican Polyglot Press: Vatican 1962). (http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_crimen-sollicitationis-1962_en.html, 6 September 2019)

Epistemic Resistance: From Feminists *avant la lettre* to Contemporary Dissenters

Women Resisting Epistemic Injustice

Even if women theologians' formal participation in epistemic labour goes back only half a century, women had been involved in denouncing and resisting epistemic oppression much before this time. Throughout the history of Christianity, there have emerged courageous, intelligent and erudite figures who raised their voice against the injustice of women's epistemic silencing. We had some outstanding examples of feminists *avant la lettre* who resisted and tackled epistemic injustice in all its manifestations, such as Hildegard von Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Theresa of Avila, Mary Ward or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Numerous women saints challenged and transgressed the established norms of female roles. In their attempts to reform corrupted institutions and practices, they have opposed the Church authorities. As a reaction, they suffered severe persecutions; their educational and spiritual projects got suppressed. Some of them enjoyed though a certain level of authority and had the opportunity to speak up and teach. Often it was due to their visions and mystical experiences they were able to gain support and credibility. For instance, Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen used very smartly the arguments of their mystical revelations with the purpose of corrective reformative interventions.

Hildegard (1098–1179), whose genius spanned many fields (including science, music, visual arts, healing, and mysticism) contested the negative stereotypes affecting women and their unfair treatment in the Church. By assuming the role of a channel for divine messages, she gained official support and dispensation for preaching to the masses. She went on preaching tours across Germany and delivered not very flattering sermons about the moral corruption of the clergy. She entered into conversations, debates and advised abbots, bishops, emperors, and Popes. Her controversial ideas resulted in her being reprimanded by the clergy, but she could go unpunished as the pope acknowledged and respected her as a visionary.

Another such example is that of Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) who spent most of her religious life under the scrutiny of the Inquisition. When she set out to reform the Carmelite order, she met harsh opposition and myriad trials at the hand of the Inquisition and the priests appointed to spiritually guide her. In her autobiography, she remarked that these persecutions were enough to drive her insane. At a time when women were forbidden to practice contemplative prayer without the strict guidance of male spiritual directors, Teresa

exhorted her sisters to believe in their own ability to access God and continue on their contemplative path.²⁴

The 17th-century Mexican scholar, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was an autodidact, writer, poet, and philosopher. She contested the prohibition of women's education and the misogynistic biblical misinterpretations which led men to bar women from studying. Sor Juana criticised the Church's oppressive treatment of women, and she claimed intellectual equality. In her *Respuesta* (1691) she brilliantly used both the Scripture and patristic texts to support women's right to intellectual endeavours. She discredited Paul's statement ordering women to be silent and its misogynous interpretation. Further, she drew on the tradition of wise women (*mujeres sabias*) of the Bible and Church history, demonstrating that in the past, women had been allowed intellectual freedoms with great benefit to the community. Her spirit of independent inquiry, thirst for knowledge and advocacy for women's right to intellectual endeavours got her in conflict with the church establishment. Finally, she was banned from her library, silenced, forbidden to share her ideas and knowledge through writings.

Feminist Scholarship and the Reconstruction of Herstory

Even though intellectual efforts to counter epistemic injustice have popped up at various moments in our history, until the second half of the 20th century, women have not really enjoyed access to formal theological education. The fact that they were deprived of access to theological knowledge implied as well that they absented from the development of hermeneutical and epistemic tools (language, concepts, symbols, theology, liturgy). Hence, they could not participate in the areas that created the hermeneutical understanding in the Church. It was after Vatican II that Catholic women started to pursue theological education in increasing numbers.

Feminist scholarship came first of all, as an expression of resistance to the patriarchal regime of truth. During the initial stage of feminist theological endeavours, starting with the 1970s, women tackled what we defined in the previous as *hermeneutic injustice*. The primary aim was to deconstruct the hegemony of the male-made discourse of theology. Deconstruction involved a process of questioning and critical reading of centuries-old misinterpretations of religious texts. Feminist scholars set out to identify patriarchal knowledge practices and address the various forms of exclusion and infringement on the

²⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle: Classics of Western Spirituality*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Paulist Press: New York 1979), 83 and 101.

epistemic agency of women. In order to achieve this, they revisited the mainstream concepts and methods of theologising. They revealed the ideological role of religious discourse in legitimating and inculcating oppressive structures, gender inequality and women's exclusion from knowledge creation and sharing. Awareness-raising of the mechanisms of epistemic marginalization was a critical step towards in the transformation of mainstream epistemological frameworks.

Further, they revisited the biblical and historical sources. They created tools to uncover and reconstruct *herstory* (women's version of history) from under the deposits of two thousand years of ideological debris. They approached the sources through the lenses of *a hermeneutics of suspicion*. The term coined in the 1970s by Paul Ricoeur has become synonymous with a deconstructive practice of inquiry and interpretation. According to this theoretical approach, there can be no objective or absolute knowledge of the meaning of texts (including literary, philosophical or even biblical texts).²⁵

This reading strategy was critically subversive of all forms of power and domination, and its aim was to reveal not only the structures of domination inscribed in texts but also in their interpretations. For instance, a pioneer in this field, biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued that a feminist reading of the biblical texts should be rooted in suspicion and it should ask whose interests and point of view do these interpretations support in the earthly realm. The ultimate goal was a feminist theological reconstruction. With this in mind she examined male-centred texts in the light of their social-historical contexts and origins. She used the methods of historical criticism to reinterpret the beginnings of the Christian religion. Remembrance, she argued, could operate as a form of *counter-memory*, empowering women to resist experiences of repression. *In Memory of Her* reconstructed early Christian beginnings in terms of a democratic model of *discipleship of equals*.²⁶

²⁵ For an introduction and definition of the term see: Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion", in: Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (eds.), *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects* (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst 1984), 63; G. D. Robinson, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Brief Overview and Critique", *Premise* 8 (1995), 12. (http://individual.utoronto.ca/bmclean/hermeneutics/ricoeur_suppl/Ricoeur_Herm_of_Suspicion.htm 12 November 2019); David Stewart, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion", *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3 (1989), 296-307.

²⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Crossroad Publishing: New York 1983).

Christian feminists looked in particular at the communities of the early church where women were still playing leadership roles – founding and leading church communities (Lydia, Prisca, Euodia and Syntyche), prophesying (Philip's daughters, Corinthian women), teaching (Prisca) or playing the role of apostles (Mary of Magdala).

The language, the doctrine of the Church as well as its imagery and liturgy, created an overwhelming sense of God as male. For this reason, feminist theology set out to create an inclusive language and took a firm methodological commitment to women's lived experience. They designated women's experience as a central methodological concept and the starting point for theological reflection: "the lens through which one does theology", "a filter through which theological sources must pass in order to be included in the doctrine."²⁷

Feminism, with its liberatory epistemology, emerged not only to diagnose and contest inherited epistemic hierarchies but also to eliminate structural injustices. After almost two thousand years of unequal hermeneutical participation, marginalisation, exclusion, all-male decision-making and authority, feminist theologians came to denounce and eliminate kyriarchal power relations inside our religious communities. *Kyriarchy* is another term coined by Schüssler Fiorenza in her ground-breaking work *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1992). It is a neologism derived from the Greek κύριος (kurios – lord, master) and ἄρχειν (archein – to rule, to dominate) by which she described all intersecting systems of domination based on the rule of a lord/master. By this definition, she extended the focus from sexist relations of discrimination in a patriarchal system to all other forms of oppression.

Feminist theology is a liberation theology sensitive to the intersections of power with gender, race, social and economic vulnerabilities. Hence, feminist scholars have been committed not only to the elimination of women's subordination but promoted inclusivity towards all other oppressed or vulnerable groups – all *wo/men*. Schüssler Fiorenza introduced this spelling to express that feminist concern was directed to all marginalised, women and men equally, independently of race, class, or religion. "Hence the spelling *wo/men* seeks to communicate that whenever I speak of *wo/men* I mean not only to include all women, but also to speak of oppressed and marginalized

²⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad Publishing: New York 1992), 15.

men. Wo/men must be therefore understood as an inclusive expression, rather than as an exclusive universalized gender term.”²⁸

Feminist scholarship accomplished very much in these few decennia of struggle against epistemic injustice. Today, thanks to the zealous work of the last 50 years, women are not any longer *only* the objects of man’s theologising but also the subjects of theology. Even though they managed to create a more inclusive hermeneutical climate, they have not reached yet the impact they should have on mainstream theological discourse and church practices. The reason is that women are still not in the position to participate in decision-making; they still lack epistemic authority. Accordingly, the feminist efforts have been more recently redirected towards reaching more recognition as knowledge producers.

Lay Reform Movements Leading from Kyriarchy to a Discipleship of Equals
The Church, in its role of a meaning-making community, has created and sustained too long its unfair differentials in epistemic authority. This injustice is insurmountable in the form in which Church governance, doctrine and regulation of morals happen today. José Medina refers to the imperative of epistemic interaction manifested in various forms of activism and political resistance. He underscores the importance of genuine dialogue between groups requiring an attitude of respect, recognition, and enabling “mutual resistance and beneficial friction.”²⁹

Partly thanks to the monumental work delivered by feminist scholars and advocates, we are testimonies of an encouraging momentum. We are witnessing the emergence of an unprecedented movement of resistance advocating structural change and demanding a renewed moral epistemic conduct from the part of the beholders of power and authority. A significant number of lay initiatives (*Voices of Faith, Future Church, Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, The Women’s Ordination Conference*) engage today in epistemic resistance, cracking open the spaces of single understandings, making room for women/lay people’s voices, experiences, their understanding of faith, God and being in the world as Christians today. They are seeking a more collaborative relationship with the ordained leadership and a more democratic church structure. They are trying to address the moral dissonance experienced between

²⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Myriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (The Continuum International Publishing Group: London 1994), 191.

²⁹ Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 198.

the teachings of the Gospel and clerical abuse of power. They are urging the Church leaders to engage in authentic dialogue, practising the virtue of epistemic justice to restore the credibility of the Church.

Conclusion

Even though women can participate today in the production of knowledge as theologians, teachers, exegetes, ethicists, pastoral associates, they are still unable to participate in sound epistemic practices. Even though in some places they are represented on church bodies and diocesan advisory groups, these are unfortunately still sporadic examples. Even though they share their knowledge and experience on family life and faith in thousands of works, they still follow the synods of the Church from the back rows.³⁰ This disenfranchisement will persist as long as they cannot enjoy full participation as equals in decision-making bodies, governance and ministries. Epistemic justice and equality will be accomplished, only when our male counterparts lend a listening ear to the imperative of equality inside religious communities.

In order to transform the Catholic Church from a *kyriarchy* into a *discipleship of equals* we need epistemically virtuous men like the Jesuits who opened their Curia in Rome to welcome the censored speakers of the Voices of Faith event; or like some priests who assumed their suspension from ministry just because they advocated equality for women. Until then, we should engage and persist in our epistemic disobedience, challenging the privileged group to unlearn their ignorance and become aware of their oppressive norms and practices. The momentum is asking for more epistemic friction.

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³⁰ Of the approximately 360 attendees at the Synod on the Family in 2015, only 30 were women who could follow in silence everything from the back pews. They couldn't vote. This was a carefully selected group of married women and women religious, who did not necessarily reflect Catholic women from all walks of life.

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