

Redefining Catholic Sisterhood: Intersections of Autonomy and Religion in Sacrilege and Nunsense

Krishnaja T. S.¹ & Soumya Jose²

¹ Research Scholar, National Institute of Technology, Andhra Pradesh, India

² Assistant Professor, National Institute of Technology, Andhra Pradesh, India

Correspondence: Krishnaja T. S., National Institute of Technology Andhra Pradesh, Tadepalligudem, West Godavari, India. E-mail: krishnajats.sclr@gmail.com

Received: March 28, 2024

Accepted: June 19, 2024

Online Published: July 30, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n6p290

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n6p290>

Abstract

Feminist Catholic sisters epitomize progressive and autonomous women who defy the stereotyped sisterhood, confronting the gender hierarchy within the patriarchal Catholic Church. The religious reforms post-Vatican II and the desideratum of inclusivity for avowed women in decision-making roles have contributed to the emergence of a feminist theological movement that thwarts the erasure of women from religious histories. Delving deep into the feminist theological tenets mirrored in Diane Shaffer's *Sacrilege: A Drama in Two Acts* and Dan Goggin's *Nunsense: A Musical Comedy*, the present study aims to examine the thespian representation of religious reforms post-Vatican II, exploring the strategies Catholic sisters adopt in their struggle for autonomy. The study contends that the representations of the radical and feminist sisters in the plays potentially challenge the rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy and uphold the deconstruction of sisterhood.

Keywords: female ordination, patriarchy, catholic church, feminist catholic sisters, feminist theology

1. Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the Catholic sisterhood revolved around prayer and evangelistic services; however, following Vatican II¹, Catholic sisters² have begun to increasingly involve themselves in altruistic and evangelistic endeavors, extending their work beyond the confines of the convent (Mangion, 2008, p. 3). By the mid-1960s, the number of Catholic sisters in the United States was approximately 1,80,000; however, four decades later, this figure declined to less than half of its original count (Kolmer, 1978, p. 16; Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 125; Giorgi et. al., 2014, p. 274; Thompson, 2016, p. 65). The steep decline in the number of women embracing sisterhood can be attributed, partly to the influence of Vatican II (1962–65), which prompted a re-evaluation of traditional Catholic practices to reunify Catholics across the globe. Vatican II demanded a re-interpretation of the Christian faith by critically reflecting the words of God, compelling the religious celibates to invigorate their passion for serving God and the laypeople. The “institutional change” (Corwin, 2012, p. 391) in the Catholic Church has encouraged sisters to become more active in their community services in varied roles such as teachers, social workers, and healthcare professionals. Significant social shifts occurred across the globe in the meantime, including “the rise of Latina, black feminist, Asian American feminist, and queer identities, the eruption of the Global South into world consciousness, and the shift of the center of the Christian faith to Africa, Asia, and Latin America,” compelling the reconsideration of movements for women’s ordination (Ronan, 2007, p. 149). In the years preceding the 1960s, a considerable number of sisters assumed the role of educators within Catholic educational establishments. During that period, the clerical hierarchy exhibited a heightened focus on recruiting sisters possessing a rudimentary educational background in Catholic schools, overlooking their comprehensive professional advancement. At the turn of the twentieth century, approximately 46,000 Catholic sisters in the United States played a crucial role in expanding American Catholic culture and identity; their activities and labor were essential to this growth, leading to the establishment of numerous schools, hospitals, and orphanages (Coburn, 2021, p. 2). Despite the sisters’ fervent insistence on acquiring higher education, their aspirations were met with resistance from clergymen who advocated for their direct deployment in the school classrooms, consequently denying them access to higher academic pursuits (McNamara, 1996, p. 626; McGuinness, 2013, p. 74-75). The cultural shift in the 1960s and 1970s, along with expanded educational and career opportunities, urged sisters to adopt progressive attitudes towards higher education and professional advancements. As women started demanding greater autonomy and opportunities for self-expression, the Church was forced to re-evaluate its attitudes towards women, including sisters. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the emancipation of sisters by challenging established gender norms and advocating for their autonomy (Giorgi and Palmisano, 2020, p. 2). As a result, many sisters were able to break away from conventual strictures, selecting more independent lifestyles that satisfied their personal goals.

In 1994, Pope John Paul II, through his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, definitively asserted that the Catholic Church lacks the authority to ordain women to priesthood (Pampara, 2023, p.134). Ordination is a stage of sacramental life where a fully formed adult responds to a religious calling; despite being integrated into the body of Christ through baptism, nourished by the Eucharist, and participating in other sacraments, women are denied ordination solely because of their sex (Beattie, 2020, p.14). Ulrike Strasser, in “Early

Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion,” finds that the status of women as ecclesiastics and their religious vocation seem to be important factors in the “historiographical banishment” of sisters (2004, p. 530). Jo Ann McNamara states in *Sisters in Arms* that the voices of sisters were often drowned out by the booming anthems of laywomen; nevertheless, it is irrefutable that sisters made steady progress throughout those years that served as a launch pad for Catholic women (1996, p. 599). In two recent apostolic letters, *Spiritus Domini* and *Antiquum Ministerium*, Pope Francis has allowed for women’s admission to three lay ministries; however, these ministries are rooted in the baptismal priesthood shared by both women and men, indicating that these roles are not unique to women and are not exclusively “theirs” (Butler and Cooper, 2021, p. 626). The sisters faced challenges in gaining recognition within a male-dominated society, yet they made significant strides in advancing the role of women in religious institutions. Furthermore, their endeavors to champion women’s entitlements within both ecclesiastical and secular institutions have acted as a precursor for the feminist movement. The history of nuns’ liberation in America is largely a complex and ongoing process that was influenced by the larger social, political, and cultural currents of the time. In the mid-twentieth century, numerous American Catholic sisters began to advocate for personal autonomy and a more active role within the Church and society. During the 1960s and 1970s, many of these sisters departed from their traditional religious orders to establish new communities that focused on empowerment and social justice. The civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the fight for women’s rights were a few of the social and political causes that the consecrated women involved in. To combat injustice and inequality, Catholic sisters began to mobilize and form organizations such as the Sisters Formation Movement (1953), the Leadership Conference of Sisters (1956), the National Coalition of American Nuns (1969), and the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (2002), focusing on raising awareness on gender issues among consecrated women. This diagnostic framing focusing on the empowerment of Catholic sisterhood elucidates the various challenges pertaining to the role of women within the Catholic Church; Canon Law prescribes the exclusion of women from decision-making processes and sidelines them from institutional leadership roles (Giorgi and Palmisano, 2020, p. 7). Nuns experienced increased isolation and marginalization as Catholic boards and agencies centralized, increasingly relying on clerics or spokesmen to interact with secular organizations (Coburn, 2021, p. 14). Giorgi and Palmisano find that, according to Radford Ruether, Catholic feminist theology in the US has developed since the late 1960s due to three factors: The civil rights and the women’s movements fostering activism among Catholic women; increased access to theological education in liberal Protestant contexts, prompting a re-evaluation of women’s roles; and renewed ecumenism and Vatican Council II, creating a climate of activism and anticipation for change (2020, p. 2). The nuns’ liberation movements aim to eliminate predetermined ideas regarding women’s religious duties, advocating feminist theological concepts and emphasizing women’s capability to undertake dynamic roles in both ecclesiastical and social contexts. Their collective efforts have contributed to the increased acceptance and recognition of women’s voices and perspectives within religious institutions.

Following Vatican II, the Church has begun promoting sisters’ participation in a spectrum of extra-conventual social activities; nevertheless, their limited autonomy and physical confinement remain a bone of contention even fifty years after the Council. The present study examines Diane Shaffer’s *Sacrilege: A Drama in Two Acts* (1996) and Dan Goggin’s *Nunsense: A Musical Comedy* (1985) to analyze how the patriarchal Catholic Church and religious codes constrain the agency and personal autonomy of sisters and the strategies they employ in turn to challenge patriarchal repression. Both plays are set in the post-Vatican II era, and the plots imply the significance of deconstructing sisterhood, facilitating their access to positions of power and authority. The study conducts a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the plays, adopting a feminist theological approach to address the themes of nunhood and the patriarchal hierarchy of the church. This theoretical framework is employed to understand and interpret the emancipatory mechanisms sisters in the plays adopt to unshackle themselves from the clutches of religious patriarchy. The plays focus on explicit representations of sisters who are not exclusively confined within the spatial boundaries of convents, but rather actively participate in social engagements; hence, the present study employs the term sisters to denote the American Catholic sisters in the subsequent discourse within the article. The sisters portrayed in *Sacrilege* and *Nunsense* manifest a unique blend of conventional and revolutionary qualities, presenting a multifaceted representation of sisterhood that resonates with the complexities of reality. The characters Sister Grace in *Sacrilege* and Sister Amnesia and Sister Leo in *Nunsense* exemplify an inclination towards questioning the patriarchal nature of the Catholic Church, aspiring for a more unconventional paradigm of Catholic sisterhood. Sister Virgilia in *Sacrilege*, on the other hand, vehemently opposes feminist interventions within the sisterhood, intending to protect the traditional Church hierarchy. Sister Robert Anne in *Nunsense* expresses deep desolation concerning the state of confusion experienced by sisters following Vatican II reforms. The portrayal illuminates the existence of a multifaceted landscape within religious lives, wherein a few actively challenge gender disparities while the majority remain steadfast in upholding the traditional and doctrinal foundations of the Church. Employing textual analysis as the methodology, the study aims to provide an in-depth examination of the plays, investigating the outcomes of religious renovation in Catholic sisterhood and the feasibility of sisters’ debunking rigid ecclesiastical strictures.

2. Discussion

2.1 Vatican II and the Sisterhood

Vatican II, a pivotal religious reform in the history of the Catholic Church, aims at modernizing the ecclesiastical institutions, making it more pertinent to contemporary needs. The Council has brought in modifications like increased ecumenism, liberalization of religious norms, and the adoption of initiatives to make the Church more approachable to laypeople. Vatican II emphasizes the importance of liberal Catholicism (Ronan, 2007, p. 150) and the unity among different Christian denominations, encouraging greater dialogue and collaboration between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities. Ryan Murphy in “Promises Unfulfilled: American Religious Sisters and Gender Inequality in the Post-Vatican II Catholic Church” notes that only one out of the fifteen sisters who attended Vatican II was given a

participant status (Sister Mary Luke Tobin). The other sisters were given “nonparticipant observer status,” like the “protestant clergy” (2014, p. 600), highlighting the limited representation and agency given to women in decision-making processes within ecclesiastical institutions, even during significant religious reforms such as Vatican II. Sister Grace (*Sacrilege*) asserts that the entire religious history lacks the presence of women; according to her, the “Bible was written by men, translated by men, and until recently, interpreted by men. You’ve written us out of history because it was politically expedient” (Shaffer, p. 81). The patriarchal hegemony in religious discursive practices resulted in a lack of “feminist historiography” (Strasser, 2004, p. 531) in Christianity until recently. Historically, men translated and interpreted *The Bible* more often than women, as they were excluded from positions of authority and higher education. Rosemary Radford argues in *Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* that canonized texts marginalize women and reduce them to “objects of male definition,” erasing their existence as human subjects, perpetuating patriarchal structures in theology, and reinforcing the normative nature of women’s “absence and silence” (Reuther, 1985, p. ix-x) in patriarchal institutions. When it comes to the political expediency of erasing women from history, the lack of female representation is undoubtedly a complex issue that goes beyond *The Bible* and Christianity. Though sisters were not given a chance to deliberate on the Council’s agenda, unlike the male theologians, Vatican II resulted in elevating women’s roles within the Church.

Following Vatican II, sisters have involved themselves in social justice initiatives, ranging from helping the homeless and refugees to promoting peace and human rights. Catholic sisters have been encouraged to collaborate more closely with laypeople because of the latter’s expanded role in the Church, knocking down conventional Church hierarchies. Copeland observes that the Council has urged the religious institutes of women and men to “reexamine the animating charisms” of their foundations, considering the “signs of the times” in renewing “theology and praxis of common life and ministry” (Copeland, 1996, p. 125). Sister Grace questions the Mother Superior’s employment of traditional practices in facilitating self-discipline and posits that “bleeding knees are not the only way to salvation” (Shaffer, p. 67). Following Vatican II, many sisters adapted to changing social norms by adopting simpler and more modern clothing instead of traditional habits, embracing new forms of liturgical music, and thus altering the traditional forms of vocation. Erin Brigham, in “Sisters and the Public Voice of Catholicism,” observes that following an era of domestication and institutionalization within religious communities during the early 1900s (2015, p. 114), Vatican II has been instrumental in permitting sisters to re-explore the prophetic aspect of their calling. The changes brought about by the Council have encouraged sisters to place a greater emphasis on their own spiritual and personal growth. Despite this, the representations of diverse reactions to the Council are vividly depicted in *Nonsense*. In particular, Sister Robert Anne reflects on the changes she has observed in the daily lives of sisters since her entry into the convent, illustrating the nuanced and often ambivalent responses to the reforms introduced by Vatican II. She recalls that the lives of sisters were different when she entered the nunhood, elucidating the reformations following Vatican II; Sister Anne observes: “The nuns appeared in black and white/ And did so every rule/ Things were either wrong or right” (Goggin, p. 56). According to Sister Anne, some kind of confusion has resulted from the religious reforms initiated after Vatican II, particularly concerning the role and lifestyles of sisters. She remarks: “But then the rules began to change/ And many lost their way. / What was always black and white/ Was turning shades of grey [...]. Confusion seems to reign supreme” (Goggin, 56). Sister Anne conveys that the shift in the roles of sisters within the Church was significant; however, it also brought about confusion and uncertainty; some sisters struggled to adapt to the changing rules, and as a result, many lost sight of their mission and purpose. Sister Anne highlights the complexities of the changes within the Church and the convent, along with the challenges she faced in adapting to new paradigms. Despite this, she remains optimistic about the positive transformation within the Church and finds the Church to be “quite progressive,” with no stringent rules (Goggin, p. 57). The Council encouraged Catholic sisters to reevaluate customary religious practices, leading to a shift towards more contemplative and spiritually oriented approaches. This movement towards modernization and social engagement has facilitated the emancipation of sisters from the constraints of traditional patriarchal structures within the Catholic Church.

Despite the Church’s conservative leanings, feminist theologians combined the two beliefs, reconciling Catholic faith with feminist principles, and working towards creating a more inclusive and equitable Church. Critiquing traditional religious beliefs and practices from a feminist perspective, feminist theology aims to challenge patriarchal norms and structures within religion. Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Lisa Isherwood, Marcella Althaus-Reid, and Elizabeth Stuart question the representation of women and other marginalized groups in religious texts and traditions, reinterpreting these sources in a way that is more inclusive and empowering. Sister Grace advocates for a more progressive Church that is open and affirming women’s roles and rights while simultaneously fighting against oppressive religious structures that limit the ability of women to practise their faith “within the Church” (Shaffer, p. 19). She claims that Christ was a man who preached spirituality that embodied traits that are typically associated with women, such as “patience, humility, non-violence, and compassion for the poor” (Shaffer, p. 20). She aims to alter the perception of the Church as a patriarchal entity, advocating for parity in faith’s representation and observance, striving to enhance opportunities for ascending religious hierarchies, and exerting authority within them. The feminist theological approach of Sister Grace is more evident in her attempts to unwind the sexist norms wired in the minds of the clergy:

MONSIGNOR. [...] may I remind you that Christ’s chosen disciples were men.

GRACE. But Mary Magdalene was his constant companion! Christ first appeared to her after the resurrection. It was she who brought the good news to the disciples.

GRACE. Women stayed at the foot of the cross when all the male disciples fled in fear. (Shaffer, p. 81)

Sister Grace thwarts traditional gender roles and expectations by attempting to showcase the courage of women and their loyalty towards Christ, reminding the Church that women have held equally important roles in religious history. She adopts a feminist theological

approach to deconstruct the longstanding traditional gender norms through rereading religious scripts. Encouraging women to become leaders in the Church, Sister Grace exhorts them to free themselves from patriarchal chains, reclaiming their rightful place. Her efforts help promote gender equality, challenging the patriarchal norms that have dominated religious institutions for centuries. Feminist theology, therefore, is employed in the plays as an act of resistance to patriarchal religious traditions and power structures that have hindered the spiritual and personal development of sisters throughout history.

2.2 *New/Feminist/Rebel Sisters*

Feminism and Catholicism can sometimes be seen as incompatible due to the Catholic Church's traditional stance on gender roles and sexuality. The idea of feminism within a religious context can be complex, as it involves challenging deeply ingrained cultural and theological traditions. On the other hand, the notion that any dissenting voices should be silenced violates the principles of free speech and expression. Religious structures frequently regard feminist sisters as "dangerous," claiming it as "new age blasphemy" that must be "stopped" at all costs (Shaffer, p. 66); Cardinal King instructs the Mother Superior to discourage Sister Grace from staging "public rebellions" and "agitating" other sisters (Shaffer, p. 19). The possible reformations within the convent are most often censured by the sisters who oppose reformations, believing that any deviation from the traditional norms and practices of their order may be a form of betrayal of their commitment and devotion to their religious beliefs. The Catholic sisters' resistance to the reforms is evident in Sister Virgilia's questioning of Sister Grace's feminist and progressive views. She rebukes Sister Grace: "You go around telling people that homosexuals, prostitutes, drug addicts and even murderers are all equal in the eyes of God. They are not" (Shaffer, p. 19). Sister Virgilia's reluctance to understand and accept the concept of equality is a result of her adherence to rigid religious principles; any challenge to these foundations can create confusion about their faith in God, leading them to question their vocation, causing emotional distress. Amy Koehlinger, in *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s*, observes that certain analysts who reflect on the recent history of the sisters have mistakenly depicted the progressive reorientation of sisters as a "radical, illegitimate, even tragic revolution led by a renegade ministry of sisters" (2007, p. 22). These analysts glorify the traditional image of the sisters of the 1950s, who were sighted only behind the thick wooden doors of Catholic parochial schools and hospitals (Koehlinger, 2007, p. 22). The view that the progressive feminist sisters are dangerous or are engaged in blasphemy reflects a conservative perspective that sees any departure from established norms as a threat.

Convents function according to a shared set of beliefs, values, and practices that guide and regulate conventual lives; these beliefs, values, and practices are deeply rooted in religious principles, including the sacraments, *The Bible*, and the lives of the saints. Catholic sisters are expected to lead a life of devotion and service, following the church's teachings and liturgical practices, simultaneously cultivating a life of prayer and spiritual growth. To reform sisterhood, it is necessary to critically examine the role and experience of sisters within the conventual system. This involves uncovering and questioning power dynamics and systemic biases that constantly suppress their autonomy; thus, deconstructing Catholic sisterhood becomes imperative for bringing about change. The deconstruction of sisterhood questions the ways in which sisters have been subjected to patriarchal norms and restrictions, such as those related to celibacy, clothing, and the denial of educational and professional opportunities. Such an analysis could also consider the perspectives of individual sisters and the complexities of their experiences, including the intersections of their religious beliefs and identities in terms of their gender, race, class, and sexuality. Dan Goggin in *Nunsense* attempts to deconstruct Catholic sisterhood by bringing into the American theatre a group of "dedicated" sisters who enjoy being uncommon and divine (p. 15). Goggin's sisters are on stage "to prove that Catholic nuns are fun/ perhaps a bit risqué/We still wear our habits/To retail our magic spell/And though we're on our way to heaven, /We're here to raise some hell" (Goggin, p. 17). Through their wit and charm, these sisters defy stereotypes, break down gender norms, and attempt to propagate a "new nun imagery" while maintaining a strong religious commitment. The sisters in the play find it "heavenly" to be a part of the group that is "puttin' on a show," bursting the "holy bubble" (Goggin, p. 17). *Nunsense* provides the prospect of balancing commitment and individual freedom. As the sisters sing, dance, and joke across the stage, they offer unique insights into the lives of sisters and their struggles between personal autonomy and devotion.

In *Nunsense*, humor often stems from the sisters' predicaments, it can be interpreted as a subversive commentary on the limitations imposed by patriarchal systems. By highlighting the absurdities and comical aspects of these constraints, the play invites reflection on the need for more inclusive and liberating interpretations of religious practices. Sister Robert Anne is depicted as feisty and rebellious, breaking away from the traditional image of a submissive sister. This portrayal challenges social expectations, highlighting the diversity of women's experiences and identities. Sister Mary Leo is portrayed as a talented ballet dancer, limiting her character to the realm of performance rather than exploring her intellectual or spiritual potential. Her ambition challenges the limitations placed on sisters, reflecting a feminist theological perspective that advocates women's freedom to explore their passions and talents beyond traditional expectations. The sisters buy a "3D-HD flat screen TV" (Goggin, p. 15) for the convent using the money for burying the dead sisters. The luxurious purchase made by the sisters, despite their original intention of using the money for funeral expenses, suggests a shift in their choices following Vatican II. This serves as evidence of their willingness to accept modernity and embrace the contemporary world. The sisters' readiness to do so is further emphasized through their statement: "If God wanted everyone to look like people.... He wouldn't have invented nuns!" (Goggin, p. 27). Catholic sisters in the play suggest that in times of distress, alter the day's routine by watching a film in the nearby theater, which offers an entirely different experience than reading a magazine, remarking that if the film is obscene, "Who'll ever know?" (Goggin p. 73). Breaking away from established norms and practices can be difficult, involving "institutional resistance"

(Giorgi et al., p. 262) and resistance from others within the community. However, it is worth the effort, as it allows one to choose a course of action that one believes to be true and right, while also potentially improving conditions within one's community.

2.3 Priesthood: A Mecca for Sisters

Women are not permitted to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders, reifying the "conspicuous absence" (Murphy, 2014, p. 595) of women in power in the Catholic Church, thus reserving the priesthood exclusively for men. The Catholic Church maintains that ordination be restricted to men, as it believes that the priesthood should be modelled after Christ and his apostles, who were all men. Cardinal King puts his foot down when Sister Grace argues for priesthood for sisters. He rebukes the nun by calling her the "worst kind of strident feminist with an ax to grind" (Shaffer, p.59). Cardinal King further reprimands Sister Grace: "You want to preach? Go preach! You can preach at the Center, on the bus. In the park! You can preach till you're blue in the face, you just can't preach in the Church!" (Shaffer, p. 59). The priest is frustrated with the sister's dream of entering priesthood. He makes every effort to stop her, preventing all possibilities of gender equality among the religious celibates. Murphy posits that the two "hegemonic forces" that subjugate sisters as the "secondary class" within the church are "the obligatory wearing of religious habit" and "the prohibition of women's ordination" (2014, p. 595). Lavinia Byrne (1994) proposes two justifications for the withholding of women's ordination and the male-only leadership in Catholicism: The first is rooted in biblical scriptures, which state that Jesus appointed women as disciples and men as apostles, and the second justification derives from a symbolic hierarchy of reality, whereby the Father sends the Son into the world to establish a chain of command dominated by males (Byrne, 1994, p. 103). Byrne further states that the two concepts pertain to leadership and the utilization of power, as it is currently inevitable within the Catholic hierarchy that an individual must be both male and ordained to assume complete leadership responsibilities; consequently, only those who have undergone ordination are deemed fit for leading roles. According to Cardinal King, the "men of the Vatican" lead lives of privilege and power that isolate them from the specific challenges faced by "American Catholic women" (Shaffer, p. 18); King notes that he never imagined a "mecca for nuns" (Shaffer, p. 89). Moreover, women are not permitted to lead a congregation as a priest or pastor, serve as a spiritual leader, or be a representative of the Church. This policy, which has been in effect for centuries, has been widely contested and questioned by many who argue that the exclusion of women from the priesthood does not reflect a modern understanding of inclusivity.

Sister Grace argues that the Church's teachings, which have historically placed men in positions of power and authority while subjugating women, contribute to a larger culture of inequality and oppression. She suggests that by perpetuating the idea that God has sanctified the lesser status of women, the Church perpetuates a harmful lie that filters down through every aspect of society. According to her, the word Catholic means "universal" or "involving all," but the Catholic Church acts as though God has approved of women's inequality, which is a deception, comparable to "poisoning a water supply" (Shaffer, p. 80). According to Sister Grace, every aspect of human existence is affected by the contamination linked with "terminal patriarchy," and she states that she will "howl to the heavens and the Vatican and anyone else who'll listen, until that lie is vanquished" (Shaffer, p. 80), and she will not "be silenced" until the "sexual apartheid" within the religious structures is abolished (Shaffer, p. 81). Sister Grace's statement highlights the tension between the Catholic Church's teachings on gender and the values of modern feminism, reflecting the feminist theological approach of deconstructing the patriarchal structures within the Church. She believes that the Church's teachings on women are not in line with the universal message of involving all. Sister Grace challenges the idea that religion and feminism are incompatible and suggests that there is a need for a more inclusive and progressive understanding of faith that affirms the dignity and equality of all people, regardless of gender. She states that feminism is about recognizing and respecting all individuals, arguing for a more comprehensive view of faith that acknowledges the worth and humanity of women.

GRACE. Let's find a new way to articulate God that includes the feminine. Because as long as we equate God with maleness, we will equate maleness with power. Let's restore original Christianity: to be Christ-like. I'm a priest. This is what a priest looks like.... It looks like love. (Shaffer, p. 62)

Sister Grace's assertion of Jesus' femininity aligns with the feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye's perspective that the propagation of Jesus' male identity by the religious system unfairly marginalizes women. Oduyoye advocates Jesus' consistent practice of inclusivity, upholding his compassionate care for the vulnerable and marginalized, reaffirming his resemblance to traditionally feminine attributes (Oduyoye, 2004, p. 156). Sister Grace attempts to define a priest from a feminist theological perspective; according to her, a priest looks like love, not necessarily in physical form but in one's devotion to helping others and providing spiritual guidance. She also asserts that she has devoted a significant portion of her life to learning the Church's official doctrine, spending countless hours in the library researching the Church's official position on every imaginable topic. She made the decision a long time ago to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and live by the laws of God rather than by the laws of men. When she petitions the Church for the ordination of sisters as priests, she speaks for many other sisters (Shaffer, 64). She believes that becoming a priest should not be restricted to men alone and is committed to using her years of experience and knowledge to create an equal opportunity for sisters. Nason-Clark observes that the only step towards "alleviating the secondary positions" of women in Christianity is the ordination of females into priesthood (1987, p. 271). The female ordination would provide female representation at the highest level of religious leadership, empowering women in their spiritual lives.

3. Conclusion

Conventual systems restrict sisters, violating their bodily autonomy and basic human rights. The deconstruction of sisterhood seeks to challenge dominant narratives, promoting an inclusive understanding of their experiences and contributions. *Sacrilege* and *Nonsense* seek to address how religion has contributed to the oppression of sisters, working towards creating more equitable and inclusive religious communities. Theatrical depictions of sisters, that defy preconceptions, inspire audiences to accept new feminist sisters, envisaging female priests. By examining and critiquing how religion reinforces systemic inequalities, the plays emphasize the significance of promoting greater solidarity among sisters. The feminist theological methodology applied to analyze plays emphasizes the need for re-evaluating and construing religious texts through a gender-inclusive lens. Thus, the notion of 'sisterhood' becomes an advantageous construct to investigate women's encounters with religion and their agency within predominantly male-oriented ecclesiastical establishments. The plays encourage the audience to reconsider their preconceptions about gender stereotypes within religion, opening possibilities for inclusive communities. Furthermore, the study contends that the integration of women into decision-making positions within the Church remains essential for the advancement of gender equality.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

Ms. Krishnaja T S has researched and drafted the article and Dr Soumya Jose has supervised the work.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Beattie, T. (2020). Human dignity and rights in the context of gender and the sacramental priesthood. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 6(1), 140-157. <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00601009>
- Brigham, E. (2015). Women Religious and the Public Voice of Catholicism. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 31(2), 109-126. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudrel.31.2.109>
- Butler, S., & Cooper, J. (2021). Ecclesial Roles Unique to Women: Some Reflections. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 85(4), 625-648. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2021.0036>
- Byrne, L. (1994). *Woman At the Altar: The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church*. New York: Continuum.
- Coburn, C. K. (2021). Crossing Boundaries and Cultural Barriers: Catholic Sisters, Social Justice, and Transnationalism. *American Catholic Studies*, 132(1), 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1353/acs.2021.0014>
- Copeland, M. S. (1996). A Cadre of Sisters Committed to Black Liberation: The National Black Sisters' Conference. *U.S. Catholic*

- Historian*, 14(1), 123-144. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25154544>
- Corwin, A. I. (2012). Changing God, Changing Bodies: The Impact of New Prayer Practices on Elderly Catholic Nuns' Embodied Experience. *Ethos*, 40(4), 390-410. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2012.01267.x>
- Giorgi, A., & Palmisano, S. (2020). Women and Gender in Contemporary European Catholic Discourse: Voices of Faith. *Religions*, 11(10), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100508>
- Giorgi, S., Guider, M. E., & Bartunek, J. M. (2014). Productive Resistance: A Study of Change, Emotions, and Identity in the Context of the Apostolic Visitation of U.S. Women Religious, 2008-2012. *Religion and Organization Theory*, 41, 259-300. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X20140000041016>
- Goggin, D. (1986). *Nunsense*. New York: Samuel French Inc.
- Koehlinger, A. L. (2007). *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (1st ed.). Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674274372>
- Kolmer, E. (1978). Catholic Women Religious and Women's History: A Survey of the Literature. *American Quarterly*, 30(5), 639-651. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712402>
- Mangion, C. M. (2008). *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- McGuinness, M. M. (2013). *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America*. New York: New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814724729.001.0001>
- McNamara, J. A. (1996). *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Murphy, R. P. (2014). Promises Unfulfilled: American Religious Sisters and Gender Inequality in the Post-Vatican II Catholic Church. *Social Compass*, 61(4), 594-610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768614547487>
- Nason-Clark, N. (1987). Ordaining Women as Priests: Religious vs. Sexist Explanations for Clerical Attitudes. *Sociological Analysis*, 48(3), 259-273. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711522>
- Oduyoye, M. A. (2004). Jesus Christ. In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, edited by Susan Frank Parsons (pp. 151-170). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL052166327X.009>
- Pampara, J. M. (2021). The Place and Role of Women in the Catholic Church: A Study Based on the Code of Canon Law and the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. *Studia Iuridica*, 99, 133-154. <https://doi.org/10.31338/2544-3135.si.2024-99.8>
- Reuther, R. R. (1985). *Readings Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ronan, M. (2007). Ethical Challenges Confronting the Roman Catholic Women's Ordination Movement in the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 23(2), 149-169. <https://doi.org/10.2979/FSR.2007.23.2.149>
- Shaffer, D. (1996). *Sacrilege: A Drama in Two Acts*. New York: Samuel French Inc.
- Stark, R., & Roger F. (2000). Catholic Religious Vocations: Decline and Revival. *Review of Religious Research*, 42(2), 125-145. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512525>
- Strasser, U. (2004). Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion. *The Journal of Religion*, 84(4), 529-554. <https://doi.org/10.1086/422479>
- Thompson, M. S. (2016). Circles of Sisterhood: Formal and Informal Collaboration among American Nuns in Response to Conflict with Vatican Kyriarchy. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32(2), 63-82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.06>

Notes

1. Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, 1962-65
2. The plays focus on explicit representations of sisters who are not exclusively confined within the spatial boundaries of convents, but rather actively participate in social engagements; hence, the present study employs the term sisters to denote the American Catholic sisters in the article.