



The immediacy of eternity: time and transformation in a Roman Catholic convent

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One of the most striking things about life in a Roman Catholic convent is that every second counts. Not in the ways most of us are used to: rushing from meeting to meeting, trying to meet grant and conference deadlines, struggling to balance career with family. In our hyper-rush culture, we have learned to guard our time closely. It is, after all, *our* time—it belongs to us. We get indignant if someone wastes it or imposes on it without our consent, because once our time has been wasted, it can't be recouped. It is a limited, expendable resource, and in a very real sense our time is a commodity. The less we have of it—the more it is in demand—the more it is worth.

Time in the convent is conceptualized somewhat differently. Time isn't money for the Sisters, but it *is* precious. It's precious precisely because it does *not* belong to us but to God. Indeed, extracting oneself from this 'worldly' temporal plane and relinquishing this false sense of time ownership is one of the first and often one of the hardest tasks young women must master when they enter the nunnery. They must come to understand that this illusory perception of time significantly hinders the experience of God, since it privileges human management of time and agency over the divine orchestration of human existence. The ideal in the nunnery, then, is what Spinoza characterizes as 'liv[ing] under the aspect of eternity' (Spinoza, 1910 [1677])—that is, to experience time in its genuine, eternal fullness, rather than as filtered through human distinctions.

This article is about how coming to inhabit a new phenomenology of time functions as a key element in the religious training of young women entering a convent in Mexico. Specifically, I suggest that learning to navigate two temporal frames—to, in effect, *read the self* across both contexts simultaneously—helps to affect a change in subjectivity for these women as they progress

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through their first stage of Religious Formation. The new nuns learn to construct an understanding of their selves as continuous across different temporal spheres, alongside (and perhaps *in spite of*) certain experiences of discontinuity that are purposefully imposed by the nunnery such as separating from one's family and wearing the convent uniform instead of street clothes. In other words, a fundamental part of the formation process is learning how to negotiate these tensions between continuity and discontinuity, and developing an experience of self that embraces both. In developing this argument, I consider what happens in the convent as both reminiscent of and characteristically different from millenarian and fundamentalist forms of Christianity.

The broader project from which this essay is drawn is concerned with the specifics of this larger developmental process, which hinges on certain intersections of gender, religion, and modernity in the Postulants' own understandings of their transformation. I argue that the process is composed of seven contingent stages that facilitate the working through of a collection of metaphysical problematics of the self—problematics which are explicitly associated in the Congregation's philosophy with larger social and political concerns. These seven stages are Brokenness, Belonging, Containment, Regimentation, Internal Critique, Surrender, and Recollection. The present essay is concerned with the final stage in this process—the re-collecting and rearranging of one's personal history into a new narrative of self that is based in a dual temporality through which that self is read and experienced.

The time(s) of our lives: negotiating temporalities

The commodification and personalization of time as a possession, and the ways we learn to barter with it in our everyday relationships, is one of the key elements many theorists—including Habermas (1987), Harvey (1990), Gergen (2000), and Giddens (1991)—point to when distinguishing so-called 'modern' and 'postmodern' ways of being from more 'traditional' forms. In the crudest and simplest of terms, we can say that this temporality of modernity is standardized, linear and progressive. It becomes a private possession, something under our personal control. This is contrasted to the more fluid, cyclical and inter-referential models of time reckoning associated within more traditional contexts, such as within bounded religious communities.

This difference in temporal framing has commonly been described by scholars of religion as 'profane' or 'ordinary' human time versus 'sacred' or 'mythic' religious time (see Berger, 1990; Bloch, 1977; Eliade, 1959; Otto, 1958). These two temporal systems can and do operate simultaneously within cultures or groups, overlapping and intersecting in complex ways. And people often look to religious experts for guidance in how to effectively and legitimately manage these two accountings of time. Religious practitioners themselves must become skilled in navigating between sacred and profane times. Scholars from Durkheim (1995 [1915]) to Levi-Strauss (1963) to Weber (1963) to Turner (1967) to Csordas (1997) have worked to document the complexities of this process.

Recently, some ethnographic material seems to suggest that this distinction between sacred and profane (or cyclical and linear) time not only is *not* helpful in some cases, but may, in fact, lead us to significantly misunderstand the beliefs, practices, and experiences of the people with whom we work. Robbins, for example, takes up these issues in his work with the Urapmin of Papua New

Guinea, who, following a Christian Revival movement in 1977, consider themselves to be a Christian group and actively anticipate Jesus' imminent return (Robbins, 2001:532). Robbins presents the problematic of the Urapmin expecting 'the end' to come at any moment, while at the same time continuing with mundane daily tasks that seem to contradict this expectation, such as planting food for the next harvest. Such 'everyday millenarianism', Robbins argues—where people simultaneously expect the end of the world as they know it and continue to invest meaningfully in the continuation of that world—is not unique to the Urapmin but appears throughout history and in many different contexts (Robbins, 2001:526), suggesting that there is more to such apparently internally inconsistent beliefs than meets the eye. Indeed, the perception of a fundamental contradiction in these practices comes, Robbins says, not from the beliefs themselves, but from our own cultural models of time, which are so naturalized within social scientific theories of human behavior and experience that they impair our abilities to understand alternative models of temporality as legitimate.

As noted, traditional Western notions of temporality hold that time is infinite, linear, continuous, and irreversible. There is, according to this model, a past, which is 'behind' us and potentially knowable. There is also a present, within which we go about the business of living. And there is a future, which may not be predictable in the strict sense but which is believed to follow more or less logically from the present, so that contingencies can largely be anticipated and planned for. But Robbins notes that for the Urapmin, as with other millenarian groups (see, for example, Ammerman, 1987; Boone, 1989; Boyer, 1992; Brummett, 1991; Harding, 1994, 2000; Thrupp, 1970; Weber, 1987; Wuthnow and Lawson, 1994), time not only begins, but also ends and then perhaps begins again (Robbins, 2001:530). In this way, time is punctuated with a series of discontinuities or ruptures, with the future not necessarily following predictably or logically from the past. The effect, Robbins argues, is an orientation to time that is radically different from traditional western understandings. Extending the kind of model Robbins constructs, we can say that if time is discontinuous, cyclical, and even reversible, expectations of an imminent end-of-days are not necessarily delegitimated by attending to what we might view as 'future oriented' tasks such as storing food for the winter and planning a wedding. When 'future' and 'past' are no longer vectors heading off in opposite directions but are bent and woven together, the relationships between 'beginnings' and 'endings' is no longer necessarily oppositional.

The formulation of time in the convent, like that among the Urapmin described by Robbins, is not easily parceled out into 'sacred' and 'profane' time, or even 'linear' and 'cyclical' time, but is understood as being simultaneously linear, cyclical, progressive, *and* regressive. But unlike the Urapmin and other millenarian groups, the focus in the convent is on the *continuity* of time rather than on its discontinuity. Specifically, although ruptures, breaks, and discontinuity are believed to be important and necessary components of self-discovery in the convent, they are understood to be *subjective reorientations* to an otherwise continuous and meaningful temporal system.

For example, the experience of rupture or discontinuity a girl experiences when she first leaves home and comes to live in the convent is acknowledged and validated as personally painful but is then quickly reframed as a parallel to the experience Mary must have had when she left her family to marry Joseph. The newcomer learns that God has chosen her, just as he chose Mary, for a special purpose. Her feeling of disjuncture, then, is recast as simply the growing pains of

recognizing her true calling, which God had set out for her since the beginning of time. Gradually, this continual naming of such experiences of rupture and discontinuity in conjunction with their reframing as spiritually and temporally continuous with God's plan for her persuades the new nun to move toward an alternate experience of self. She learns how to navigate between temporal realities and, with increasing skill, to use this process instrumentally to achieve a change in the subjective experience of the self. In this way, I suggest that coming to inhabit a new phenomenology of time helps the new nuns I worked with to integrate and personalize the various elements of Religious Formation they encountered over the course of the first year.

Religious (trans)formation

I spent eighteen months with an incoming group of Postulants in an active-life congregation of Roman Catholic nuns in the city of Puebla, Mexico. I wanted to get a feel for what goes on emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually with these young women as they try to decide if they should pledge themselves, body and soul, to Christ for all eternity. From my readings of historical accounts of convent life, I expected to find fasting nuns who wished to escape their bodies, disciplined women who saw their materiality as an impediment to saintliness and who felt the clear and constant call of God. But what I found was something else.

I was surprised to learn that the sense of 'the call' is usually far from clear to these women as they enter the nunnery. They have a general feeling that God wants them there, but they are unsure, nervous, and acutely aware that something besides God could be propelling them toward the Religious Life. Challenging, questioning, and refining these feelings of Religious Vocation is a lengthy and difficult process, and it is one that requires careful guidance and care by those who have gone through it themselves.

In their first year, the Postulants are mentored through a shift in self-interpretation that serves as the foundation for their subsequent religious training. They learn to incorporate into their daily experience a new story of who they are and what their purpose is—one that reorders and restructures their understandings of their own personal histories, while at the same time situating these new understandings within a temporal frame that is different from that on the 'outside'. By the end of this first stage of training, the Postulants had learned to reframe their experiences of The Call to the Religious Life not as a discrete event but as a *developmental process* that spans their whole lives.

The congregation

The congregation I worked with was established in Mexico in 1885 by Father Juan Diego de Muro y Cuesta.¹ Born in 1851, he was heir to the War of Independence from Spain and the Mexican-American War. He was also witness to a no-holds-barred project of modernization and the resulting social and economic upheaval that eventually led Mexico to bloody revolution in 1910. He saw the emergence of a new social class, a disenfranchised urban poor, who seemed to be left behind in the march of progress. Father Muro founded the Congregation—which he called

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

The Siervas, or Servants—with the specific mission of helping this poor, forgotten, and suffering group of people to reclaim their ‘traditional’ (Mexican) values and dignify themselves as human beings against the ‘dehumanizing’ and ‘evil’ effects of modernization. He directed his critique at what we might call the *subjectivity* produced and cultivated through the forces of industrial capitalism and modernization and bolstered by the Protestant ethic. This modern subjectivity took on an added dimension for Father Muro when viewed through his particular theological lens. It assumed a gender.

Father Muro came to locate the decay of Mexican values and identity with mothers who had been ‘masculinized’ by capitalist development. He also believed that young women are, by the grace of God, the only possible saviors of a world in crisis, and a concern for the ‘proper’ formation of young women came to eclipse the other works of the Congregation. In the founder’s understanding, this non-modern subjectivity—this particular way of knowing, experiencing, being in, and relating to the world—is purposefully and undeniably female, Mexican and Catholic, as defined *against* the ‘masculine’ and ‘Protestant’ values perceived to be foundational to American-style ‘modernity’.

Today, almost 100 years after his death, the Sisters believe their founder’s mission to have radically new importance as Mexico grapples with the contravening tensions of globalization on the one hand and the preservation of a sense of national and cultural integrity on the other. They view their mission as nuns as nothing less than providing a moral compass by which Mexicans can see their way through the perils posed by these social and cultural conflicts. And they set out to do this by inhabiting an alternative orientation to the world as Brides of Christ and Mothers of the Poor. The process of Religious Formation is designed to cultivate in newcomers to the convent the attitudes and dispositions necessary for the development of this internal constellation.

Formation, then, involves not merely a spiritual commitment but a political and social one. Women who enter the Congregation with only a vague sense of Vocation must come to believe that God wants them in this particular congregation, at this particular time, to engage actively these particular issues. During the first year of training, the Postulants slowly begin to master the tools and techniques necessary for this transformation.

Religious vocation as a story of the self

To understand how this works, we need to look at the experience of Religious Vocation (‘the call’ to the Religious Life) not just as a spiritual or psychological event but as a *story of the self*—a ‘narrative identity’ in Ricoeur’s (1992) sense of the term, a cohesive account of the self that follows a particular trajectory and that is intelligible only in retrospect. Narrative identity in this sense is not necessarily a consciously devised presentation of self, though this may sometimes be the case. Rather, Ricoeur suggests that it is a function of trying to make sense of two radically different experiences of self—the diverse experiences we have of ourselves at different points in our lives (‘selfhood’) and the sense that there is some essential kernel of self that can be traced through these various permutations (‘sameness’). He argues that our subjective sense of who we are is continually produced and reproduced through a dialectical relationship between these modes of experience. What narrative identity does, then, is to

provide an arena for the integration of these different temporal modes of self-experience in a way that has meaning in a particular context. For Ricoeur, this story of the self is primarily an explanatory exercise for making sense of ‘how did I get here’ (wherever ‘here’ is for the narrator) that reflects multiple layers of experience and interpretation. As the ‘here’ changes, the story, too, is altered to accommodate the new direction. This narrative implicitly appeals to a certain kind of temporal organization (Ricoeur, 1985). Time is understood to unfold along a linear trajectory, with the present firmly ensconced between the past (known) and the future (imagined).

But in the convent, we see something a little different. Newcomers are guided in how to tell a new story of themselves—to construct a particular type of linear, narrative identity that resituates all life experience, past, present *and future*, within a temporal framework that favors the *circularity* of time and draws meaning from it. The essential elements of one’s human life story are worked into a larger narrative with a different temporal frame of reference. This new temporal lens is both timeless and cyclical: it enfolds both the notion of eternity (that time and existence have no beginning and no end) and of the shaping of time according to certain meaningful patterns, which find expression in various religious beliefs and observances. Just as Moses led the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land, for example, so it is believed that Jesus lead the faithful out of the bondage of sin and into Eternal Life. The lambs’ blood on the Jews’ doorpost caused the Angel of Death to pass over their homes, just as Jesus’ blood—as the Lamb of God—protects his followers from sin and therefore from death. Sinful, disobedient, carnal Eve brought about the Fall of humankind, but this Fall is repaired by the obedience and chastity of a woman who herself is free of original sin. There is, in other words, a cycling and overlapping through time, repeated and varied enactments of key themes such as bondage and freedom, sin and redemption.

These cross-temporal correlates—and many, many others—are woven into the celebrations that make up the Liturgical year, which begins with the Annunciation to Mary, continues through Jesus’ birth at Christmas, and culminates with his crucifixion and resurrection at Easter. The entire year is structured to parallel the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which itself is understood to parallel the creation, fall, and redemption of humankind. The rhythm of convent life is modeled on this cycle on various levels, with the days of the month, the progression of the week, and even the hours of the day organized to replicate this pattern. It is within this temporal frame that the Postulants learn to understand their Vocations and their decisions to enter the nunnery not simply as one young woman’s desire to unite with Jesus but as part of an awesome, divine plan of salvation.

So how might this happen? As noted, most of the Postulants were initially unsure if they had really been called by God. They anxiously looked for any sign—no matter how small—that their Vocation was genuine. The Postulants learn, in fact, that it is certainly possible to *have* a genuine Vocation and not know it, or to believe falsely that one has been called to the Religious Life when this isn’t the case. They tended to view Vocation as something they did or didn’t have, and it was not clear to them how to tell the difference. They are wary of their own senses of calling, and rely on outside validation from their superiors as to whether or not their experiences were ‘real.’ As Carlota (a 19-year-old Postulant) told me, ‘I just wanted someone to tell me, “Yes, you have a Vocation”, or, “No you don’t”’. ‘But it’s not that easy. No one can tell you for sure if you have a Vocation or not. This is between you and Christ.’

