14 Global Catholicism, gender conversion and masculinity

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Introduction

Within studies of global religion, gender has remained somehow marginal, particularly in sociological and anthropological work. Pioneer studies focus on women in relation to migration and transnationalism, but rarely adopt a more relational approach that includes an analytical angle on men and masculinities. The aim of this chapter is to explore how membership within a Catholic transnational movement produces changes in gendered family relations and in models of masculinity. It focuses on the peculiar role played by men’s conversion to principles such as chastity, vulnerability and family sacrifice in the spreading of a new global model of Western-centred Catholicism. It takes as a case in point the European Catholic reformist movement known as the Neocatechumenal Way (henceforth NCW), focusing specifically on laic missionary men within the movement.

The NCW selects (mainly) European missionary families to evangelize abroad. In doing so, their aim is twofold: to create new NCW communities within existing parishes, and to strengthen global connections between the Roman centre of Catholicism and its worldwide realities.

Two elements of the NCW make it particularly interesting for the study of religion in global societies. First, the movement successfully brings about the Vatican’s aim to reassert itself as a contemporary transnational public actor. It does so by actively engaging with the economic, political and social areas of concern—such as those related to family, gender, migration or the environment—where the Catholic Church seeks to fulfil its pastoral mission (Ferrari 2006). Importantly, this global engagement has to contend with the ‘progressive disentanglement’ of Catholicism from ‘its traditional sites and civilization’ (Geertz 2005, p11), and with the development of new religious institutions, understandings and experiences across the globe (Van der Veer 2001; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010). At the same time, however, the transnational mission envisaged by the NCW also aims at realigning the multivariate expressions of this religion to its Roman Catholic centre.

Second, the transnational mission of the NCW reveals ongoing changes in the traditional global dimension of the Catholic Church. While the NCW is partly integrated within the traditional structures and hierarchies of the Catholic Church, it also assigns importance to charismatic leaders and to grassroots missionary initiatives. It overcomes the classical distinction between the
centralized nature of Catholic transnationalism and the more flexible and decentralized spontaneity of Protestant and Charismatic ones (Rudolph 1997; Coleman 2000; Levitt 2003).

Gender plays an important role in the global mission of the NCW, which rests on the principle that global evangelization is better promoted by laic families who ‘enflesh’ in their daily lives ‘the reality the Church seeks to communicate’ (cf. Himes 2006, p. 17). Families in mission actualize an archetypical form of Christian diaspora (Gallo 2016a): an ‘early Church’ comprised of travelling subjects who ‘function as the seed to disseminate the message of Jesus’ while remaining loyal to the holy centers (Baumann 2000, p. 319; Levitt 2003; Gallo 2016b). The NCW missionary model refers less to a ‘de-sexualized’ male or female religious actor and more to men and women en famille, who are considered to be more successful in spreading reformed Catholicism globally. Members’ subscription to various principles regulating sexuality, marriage, reproduction and parenthood publicly translates Christian teachings into concrete forms of exemplary conduct. In the NCW ethos, the fact that these principles become tangible in the everyday conduct of ‘ordinary’ men and women, make religious norms more plausible and attractive to future converts.

The chapter argues, first, that the project of creating a reformed global (Catholic) society through missionary activities rests on a gender conversion: both men and women are required to undergo a deep transformation in terms of their identity and family relations, and to make this transformation available and debatable publicly. Second, it suggests that men’s transnational religious activities, in particular, foster a specific model of globalization: not so much a multidirectional process that opens up spaces for syncretism and cross-cultural understanding of religion, but as a centre-periphery expansion from a (European) centre to countries that are considered geographically and substantially ‘distant’ from normative Catholicism.

Debating gender in global religions

This chapter responds to the need for a more relational approach to gender within contemporary studies of transnational religious flows, and of the role played by religiously informed models of femininity and masculinity in the development of a global society (Boyd et al. 1996; Krondorfer and Hunt 2012; Fedele 2013; Gallo 2018). By focusing on the NCW, the present analysis brings to light ongoing changes occurring in the gendered organization of transnational missionary activities, and explores the role played by religiously informed models and experiences of masculinity in the framing of a global society.

The link between gender and religion has received little attention, and limited studies focus on femininity (King 2005; Woodhead 2007). Scholars note that within the framework of secularization theory on the privatization of religion, men are seen to engage with the rational logic of the public sphere while de-identifying with religion, while women tend to nurture the flame of religious tradition in the domestic sphere (Cannell 2006; Woodhead 2007). However, such analyses—in focusing on why men are not religious—do not explain why religion may attract men across different contexts or historical periods (Thompson and Remmes 2002; Werner 2011), or how global religions inform and are shaped by understandings and experiences of masculinity.

From a different but related perspective, within recent studies of global Christianity, there is a tendency to take the consolidated structures of the Catholic Church for granted (Casanova 1997; Gallo 2016a), while most attention is paid to the decentralized and spontaneous features of Protestant and Charismatic globalizations (Coleman 2000; Hann 2007). This may result from the fact that Catholicism is generally assumed to be an expression of ‘institutionalized transnationalism,’ in which a centralized and hierarchical organization spreads through the sending of official religious representatives (Levitt 2003). However, the NCW promotes
important changes in the globalization of Catholicism today, insofar as it entrusts laic missionaries with the authority and responsibility usually associated with priests or nuns. It also partly seeks to decentralize the decision-making processes involved in transnational evangelization, shifting them to some extent away from traditional institutions (like the Vatican, the National Episcopal Conferences, or the parishes) and towards NCW leaders and missionary members. Religiously informed gender norms are pivotal in the transnationalization of missionary activities and in the related project of shaping the contours of a global (Catholic) society.

Studies of colonialism have yielded valuable insights into the interplay between gender and religion in global societies. Scholars have highlighted how the globalization of Christianity deeply redefined the gendered family norms of colonized peoples according to a ‘universalist’ model of Christian morality (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Rafael 1993; Gallo 2017). More recently, however, modern circulations of people, money, media and technology have contributed to transform religion ‘from below,’ partly reversing the traditional flow from ‘the West to the Rest’ (Beyer 2003; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010). Transnationalism today paves the way for renewed models of gendered participation in congregational life and global society (Fedele 2013; Gallo 2016c). As Maskens (2015) notes, membership of globalized religions not only fosters men’s search for spirituality but also their embeddedness in domestic life. Global religious consciousness ‘should not be considered uniquely as a cognitively cultural system’ but involves physical and material activities (Coleman 2000, p. 5), through which members’ religiosity and gendered identities are transformed.

This chapter highlights how the renewed transnationalization promoted by the NCW arises from the movement’s critique of traditional gendered forms of Catholic evangelization, and of the global society it seeks to create. The NCW sees ‘traditional’ missionary activities as too distant from the everyday concerns of ordinary people, and unnecessarily tolerant of the socio-cultural variety of gendered family ideologies and relations. The movement both draws and departs from the global church envisaged since the Second Vatican Council, also known as Vatican II (1962). The latter, at least in principle, assigned legitimacy to a global society that was inspired by universal Catholic principles yet also embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts. It acknowledged that this contextual variety presented opportunities for a global renaissance in Catholic religiosity (Wogman 2000). In contrast, the NCW reasserts new universal orthodoxies that challenge the contextual variety of a global Catholic society, as well as the existence of different gendered family cultures. By actualizing what could appear to be a neo-colonial form of Catholic globalization, the NCW also challenges the fluidity, dynamism and syncretism often associated with contemporary global societies. As such, the study of the interplay between gender and religion within NCW transnationalism is highly relevant to the broader understanding of the (traditional) tension between the universal and localized nature of the Church from a contemporary viewpoint.

**Context and methods**

The NCW was founded in 1964 by Kiko Arguello and Carmen Hernandez, as a response to Vatican II. The NCW advocates for the need to move beyond the official celebration of orthodoxy towards the transposition of norms into good practice, and for the restoration of the institutional credibility of the Catholic Church. Its project reflects a dual concern: to re-evangelize Europe vis-à-vis the challenges posed to native Christian churches by secularization and immigrant religions (Gallo 2016b), and to realign world Catholicism with its Roman ‘centre.’ Although it was initially viewed with suspicion by the Vatican,
its Official Statute was recognized in 2008. The NCW is today a powerful grassroots movement within mainstream Catholicism, with a membership of around a million.

There are at present no studies of the NCW and access to its official documents is difficult, however. The analysis in this chapter draws on 35 semi-structured interviews conducted from 2011 onwards in Italy (Perugia and Rome), the UK (London), Turkey (Izmir and Antakya) and India (Bangalore) with NCW lay national leaders, priests, families in mission and parish-based members. The field locations were selected to facilitate research across three distinct types of places: those where the movement is strongly rooted and ‘closer’ to a majority-faith tradition (as in Italy); those where the NCW speaks to other Christian majoritarian denominations (as in the UK); and those where Catholicism coexists with non-Christian majority religions (as in Turkey and India).

The global dimension of the NCW

In the early 1960s, Vatican II placed renewed emphasis on the Catholic Church as a transnational actor concerned with humanitarian issues (Casanova 1994) and addressed the family as the primary concern of global Catholic evangelization. Seeking to more closely address people’s everyday concerns (Himes 2006), Vatican II conceived of gendered domestic relations as the locus for the true development of the Christian personhood. Since then, this approach has continued to drive the Church’s involvement in questions concerning marriage, procreation, abortion, homosexuality and new reproductive technologies, within and beyond the nation state. The NCW well exemplifies the post-conciliar ethos in promoting a reformed global Catholicism by making gendered family relations a central concern—and an agent—in its evangelizing mission.

The ‘return’ to pre-marriage chastity, high birth rates within marriage (with procreation being seen as one of the most important conjugal aims), heterosexuality and inter-family solidarity are among the principles the NCW aims to foster through the formation of capillary parish networks worldwide. Families in mission are sent by the NCW to set up small communities within pre-existing parishes abroad. Once in the receiving destination, they set up weekly meetings with parishioners where they debate key political issues relating to family unity, sexuality and reproduction, conjugality and parenthood, and offer wider teachings on the movement’s values and purposes. Classical courses in preparation for birth, baptism and marriage take place alongside more modernist discussions about sexuality (including homosexuality), reproduction (and new technologies that may be involved in this), adoption (e.g. by single parents) and divorce. Rather than simply dismissing these topics as ‘sinful’ or ‘private,’ discourses of sex, the unorthodox family, and science and technology are contested ‘from within.’ To this end, gynaecologists, doctors and scientists belonging to the movement are actively involved in supporting Catholic ideas on reproductive politics and gender relations. Each NCW parish in Europe is encouraged to generate new families in mission. By caring for those people who have not yet been reached by ‘the message,’ it is believed that a higher degree of religiosity can be achieved. Further, families in mission primarily promote intra-Catholic conversion, as opposed to the conversion of non-believers or those of other faiths.

Gender conversion and transnational missions

An important element that emerges from interviews with laic missionary men is the role of conversion to the NCW in supporting their engagement with transnational evangelization.
Entering the movement is both a personal act of self-transformation and a commitment to a global social change. The global society that gendered conversion seeks to communicate is centred on the family—crucially, however, it is centred on the family as a normative public model, as opposed to the family as a private domain for the nurturing of religiosity. As discussed in the previous section, it upholds and promotes religiously informed values such as chastity outside of marriage, procreation within marriage, male and female sacrifice, and exposure to uncertainty and vulnerability—all goals that can be achieved through the equal participation of men and women in domestic and public religious life. Gender conversion aims at creating a global society through concrete personal and family journeys and through the material, spiritual and emotional support offered to missionary families by ‘local’ NCW parishioners who stay ‘back’ in Europe. Overall, it requires the development of a ‘new man,’ whereby the family, the locality and the global society are threaded into a common mission of reform. It expects men not only to ‘experience new gendered models as “good men”’ (Burchardt 2018, p. 55), but to act to bring societies worldwide closer to renewed Catholic orthodoxies.

A brief look into the meanings of conversion is useful here. Entering the NCW demands a break with past ‘false’ and ‘banal’ expressions of Catholicism and requires a change in the self en-famille. As in the context of global Pentecostal Christianity studied by Maskens (2015), religious conversion is primarily a gender conversion, insofar as it marks a move from ‘old men’ to ‘new men.’ The NCW distances itself from some of the features identified with ‘traditional’ hegemonic masculinity—for example careerism, authority, a public-oriented social life and disengagement from domestic tasks. It prompts men to rework imbalances in the sexual division of domestic labour, and condemns authoritative expressions of masculinity in the home (see also Aune 2010). The NCW gendered critique revisits the asymmetry between the value placed on pre-marriage chastity among women, in particular, and the traditional Church tolerance of freer male sexuality and adultery. The NCW ascribes great importance to abstinence before marriage for both men and women: this is seen as sending an exemplary message in a secularized society where sexuality is deemed to have been commodified.

The global nature of the NCW is significant in driving men’s gender conversion. In turn, the embracing of new gender models underpins their vocation for transnational evangelization, as illustrated by the discussion below. This was part of an interview with Tommaso (37), who currently lives with his family in India:

**ESTER:** You have always been a member of a parish in Rome, what has changed now?

**TOMMASO:** The Church has always been global . . . but normal parishes carry on their own life, in a provincial way. Before I entered the NCW I had no sense of really belonging to something bigger. Here parishes are interconnected worldwide—they help each other, they carry out common projects, they work to create better families. So you feel you are changing and yet also part of a wider mission.

Gender conversion is thus both an outcome and an engine of the global nature of the movement: by promising missionary men the chance to play an agentive role in building a reformed society, it also offers greater scope for personal transformations. While the NCW subscribes to the traditional emphasis placed by Catholicism on the community, it also draws from Protestant valorizations of individual agency. As a result, the movement recognizes the importance of well-articulated grassroots initiatives and values personal charisma and initiative. Although it makes decisions about missionary families, it is the latter who put themselves forward for transnational religious work. Missionary families depend on their activities and goals from the NCW headquarters, with NCW leaders required to mediate
between Vatican representatives, National Episcopal Conferences and receiving parishes in relation to evangelical activities. Parts of the Catholic establishment within and beyond Europe view the transnational religious work of such missionaries as an untameable force that eludes institutionalized control. At the same time, however, the establishment supports the development of a capillary network of NCW communities because of its success in mobilizing devotees transnationally in relation to specific political projects, such as the regular World Youth Days, more occasional events such as the Protest Day against New Reproductive Technologies (which took place in Madrid in 2009) or, more recently, anti-gender campaigns in Europe.

Conversion requires the convert to detach him or herself from previous allegiances (Gallo 2016a), a radical change that becomes particularly fraught with tensions when men decide to enter into missionary activities. On the one hand, transnational missions require the renunciation of previous lifestyles and professional activities. This often leads to open conflict with non-NCW family members, who may condemn NCW couples for exposing themselves and their children to uncertainty and/or the danger of religious fundamentalism. On the other, missionary men become fully dependent—both materially and emotionally—on the network of NCW parishes. The latter engage in transnational activities in a variety of ways: for example, parishes sustain missionary families abroad through regular self-taxation; they dispatch regular packages containing sacred readings, food items or other supplies; and parish members are often sent abroad for temporary periods to offer free childcare, domestic support and spiritual comfort. As mentioned previously, the movement also sends doctors, scientists, social workers and family counsellors to destinations around the world in order to support the NCW discourse through scientific arguments.

In terms of the longstanding transnationalism of the Catholic Church, the NCW has introduced the relatively novel idea that evangelization must be carried out through the ‘extraordinary’ sacrifices of ‘ordinary’ men (and women) in order for the expansion of Catholicism to also succeed in creating a moral order. Personal gendered transformation is expected to become a symbol of true religiosity and to have an impact on society well beyond the limits of the person, the community and the nation-state. The popular NCW saying that ‘the Way is for distant ones’ well exemplifies the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of conversion: a relational change from within, alongside a wider geopolitical project of expansion. These two layers of conversion are often entangled in men’s accounts of their missionary roles, and are braided into the concrete organization and functioning of transnational activities.

The limits of transnational missions: exposure, failure and conflict

The problems that missionaries encounter in translating NCW teachings into practice cement a sense of collective sacrifice, but also raise dilemmas. Missionary men experience a double break in their gendered relations and identities once they decide to ‘go global’. Firstly, they are often stigmatized by non-NCW kin and friends for sacrificing ‘real blood relations’ in favour of strangers in distant locations, and may be targeted as bad sons and irresponsible fathers. Their evangelical commitments demand that they prioritize certain ties over others, and create ambivalences in the transnational dimension of family life: thus, they strengthen the global interconnections between missionary families and parishes but create fissures in ‘external’ social ties. Sacrificing pre-existing ties is a trope through which missionary men make sense of their global mission: a symbol of their distance from the ‘ordinary’ phenomenology of Catholic life. Secondly, men who become laic missionaries often lose their ‘traditional’ roles as family breadwinners. Missionary activities allow men to gain a new standing vis-à-vis NCW communities—something that can potentially
compensate for the sacrifices made in terms of leaving professional positions, financial security or family support ‘behind.’ However, difficult encounters with receiving societies can frequently lead to evangelical failures, which can also make it necessary for missionaries to return to their home parishes.

Men’s evangelical failures often result from the tensions generated by the public dimension of evangelization. Gender conversion not only requires men to be oriented towards the domestic needs of the household (Fedele 2013) but also requires that models and experiences of male domesticity are shared in public. Men are expected to carry out evangelical activities in public places such as parks or squares, and to attract a wider audience within and beyond the parish. The fact that evangelization touches upon ‘private’ concerns related to sexuality, conjugality, reproduction and parenthood while simultaneously aiming for a highly public form of visibility has been a source of conflict within the Catholic community in different contexts. These conflicts reveal an opposition between the global society project envisaged by the NCW and, the persistent—if not growing—relevance of national religious institutions in defending culturally inflected ideas and norms of Catholic belonging. The universalist ambition of the NCW, combined with its Western nature, exposes laic missionary men to critiques, derision and ostracism from ‘ordinary’ non-missionary men and women, as well as from religious representatives. Receiving Episcopal Conferences and parishes, for instance, may clash with the Vatican or the NCW in relation to evangelical activities carried out by ‘white missionaries.’

In Bangalore (South India), the NCW is often criticized by the Indian Episcopal Conference because its teachings (such as the promotion of higher birth rates) are inimical to national projects around reproduction and public health. Public evangelization in South India is also subject to legal sanctions under the Forced Conversion Law: indeed, in 2010, a number of NCW members were arrested and accused of practising proselytizing activities. In the same year, the NCW was banned by the Japanese National Conference of Bishops, which considered the movement’s teachings to be incompatible with the national culture and family values. Prior to this, the Archbishop of Tokyo had publicly accused the Vatican of giving priority to the directions set by the NCW headquarters in Rome and marginalizing the views of national religious authorities. In 2013, NCW missionaries in Antakya (a multi-religious city on the border between Turkey and Syria) were publicly attacked by local religious and civil society representatives after the NCW criticized the Church there for its tolerance of inter-faith marriages and unofficial polygamy among local Muslim families. Preaching Catholic purity and normative superiority was considered a risky endeavour in a context where local religious and government authorities work for inter-faith dialogue between a (majority) Muslim population and minority Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Catholic communities. In all of these cases, missionary families were ‘called back’ by the NCW under Vatican instructions.

The return from the missionary destination is viewed by missionary men as an abdication from the project of a global Catholic society. Men experience the problems arising from transnational religious work as personal failures, which become a deep source of insecurity in relation to the foundations of their own conversions.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed how gender and religion are entwined within contemporary projects of building a global (Catholic) society. Transnationalism has characterized Christian expansion (and religious expansion in general) in different ways through history (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Van der Veer 2001; Levitt 2003). The analysis of the contemporary role that religion plays in framing a global society should therefore consider how the new
builds on the old, and how the transnational nature of religious flows has changed in the process. Transnational flows not only lead to changes in the understanding of religion but also transform the practices and relationships through which religion is lived in the everyday. Indeed, the assumed transcendent nature of Christianity has channelled a distinctive disjuncture between its supposed immateriality and the worldliness of gendered family life (Cannell 2006; Keane 2008). However, as the analysis here has shown, gender is an important dimension of religious expansion. There is a need to foster analyses of religion in the context of globalization by discussing how models and experiences of femininity and masculinity are transformed by transnational religious flows and, in turn, how they influence popular beliefs and lives across borders.

At a broader level, the interest of the NCW lies in its innovative post-Vatican II role in promoting changes in the transnational work of evangelization—from a centralized and hierarchical network of religious institutions (at supranational, national and local levels) towards the gradual introduction of more grassroots and fluid forms of global religious expansion. Gender conversion holds relevance for an articulated understanding of the complex global organization of the NCW, and of its evangelical mission. While the importance ascribed to gendered family models draws from the global ethos of Vatican II, it also draws from the more recent acknowledgement of the unsuccessful nature of the attempts made by the established Catholic Church to move closer to the concerns of ordinary people worldwide. Normative positions are less attractive to people if promoted by transcendent religious figures; they become more credible at a global level if they are instead put forward by men (and women) who witness the vision of a reformed global society through their own daily lives.

Influenced by a post-conciliar religion that aimed to be at once ‘modern and public’ (Casanova 1994, p. 9) in shaping a global society, gender conversion prompts men to engage with political questions related to worldly affairs of domesticity, reproduction, sexuality and overall family life well beyond their local and national horizons. The expansion of the NCW beyond Europe seeks to bring lay missionaries closer to different Catholic realities worldwide. At the same time, however, it assigns new importance to Roman Catholicism as the centre of orthodoxy and authenticity (cf. Ferrari 2006). This chapter argues that gender conversion is key to transnational missions and highlights both its private and public dimensions: becoming a member of the NCW is both an act of personal self-transformation and a commitment to a global mission. It further argues that—at least in principle—the global society envisaged by the NCW leaves little space for the fluidity, creativity and syncretism usually associated with globalization. Instead, NCW transnationalism is centred around the spreading of new religious and gendered orthodoxies that are intended to realign families to a specific model of ‘the family.’ This family model is based on the NCW critique of secularized European societies, but it is also constrained by the movement’s limited dialogue with the cross-cultural varieties of Catholicism that are officially valued by the modern church. In recent decades, the transnationalization of Catholicism has meant not just the increasing internationalization of Rome but also the rising importance of the National Conferences of Bishops (Casanova 1997). This has contributed to growing tensions between global religious movements, the Vatican and Episcopal Conferences in single sovereign states, and must be taken into account in analysing the tensions between the NCW’s contextual and universal globalizing aims.

Gender and family are national concerns for societies that are the objects of evangelization, partly in relation to projects of national development and modernity. In different receiving contexts, religious and political authorities are concerned with what is perceived to be an ‘invasive’ and ‘culturally insensitive’ religious approach to gender and family. They subscribe with reluctance to a project that runs the risk of re-enacting colonial
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logics of conversion and assimilation, even as it connects Catholic believers with the holy centre of Rome.

References


