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Author(s): Michele Dillon
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3712002
Accessed: 24/04/2011 11:54

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Cultural Differences in the Abortion Discourse of the Catholic Church: Evidence from Four Countries*

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This essay investigates the cultural themes used by the Catholic Church in arguing against abortion in four different countries: Ireland, Poland, the U.S., and England & Wales. The focus is whether the Church differentiates its use of cultural arguments in accordance with its insider/outsider institutional status, or the contested nature of the abortion policy-making environment. The prevalence of women-oriented themes is also explored. I find that in each country the Church draws more heavily on cultural than on doctrinal sources of legitimation, and exhibits a strong similarity in the sorts of cultural arguments used. There is a significant difference in the patterned appeal to national identity in the U.S. and Poland, and its absence in England and Ireland.

Increased political sensitivity to pluralism and the social construction of cultural identity makes it difficult nowadays to legitimate institutional practices by invoking a pre-political (Öffe 1984: 210) discourse of universal morality, or by appealing to collective national values (see Bellah 1975; Demerath and Williams 1985). Yet, the Catholic Church’s opposition to abortion continues to be grounded in natural law and universally binding moral principles. The centerpiece of the Church’s position on abortion is its belief that the natural right to life of the fetus is absolute, fundamental, and non-negotiable. Although the Church construes its anti-abortion position as doctrinally fixed, the same does not apply, however, to how it presents its teaching to the public.

We already know from previous research that the Church establishes legitimacy for its stance on artificial contraception, homosexuality (Kowalewski 1993), and, in America, on abortion (Dillon 1995), economic justice, and nuclear disarmament (see Burns 1992; Cheney 1991), by combining doctrinal with culturally salient, secular arguments. Does this strategy characterize, however, the Church’s teaching on abortion in countries other than the U.S., and does it result in cross-national differences in the Church’s discourse on an issue that is central to its institutional identity?

The Western trend of increased liberalization in abortion attitudes and laws since the 1960s has been interpreted as reflecting a postmaterial cultural shift

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away from traditional religious and cultural norms (Inglehart 1990: 195-196, 205), and among Catholics, as evidence of a compartmentalization of religion from sexual morality (Greeley 1993; Jelen, O'Donnell, and Wilcox 1994). Other cross-national studies on abortion have examined the impact of Catholic socialization on abortion attitudes (Wilcox and Jelen 1993) and of political culture on attitudes toward the Church's involvement in politics (Greeley 1993). None of these studies, however, explored whether there is a relationship between the way in which the Church argues about abortion and the national political and cultural context in which it articulates its views.

This essay investigates the discursive strategies on abortion used by national conferences of Catholic bishops in four different countries: Ireland, Poland, the U.S., and England & Wales. In particular, I am interested in whether the Church's insider/outsider institutional status, and the degree of contestation in the abortion policy environment, differentiate the Church's arguments.

In both Ireland and Poland, the Church is a cultural insider and a deep-rooted source of national identity. Historically, Ireland served as a bastion of Catholicism on the frontier of western Europe, and Poland as a Catholic bulwark on the eastern frontier (Davies 1984: 159). In America and England, by contrast, the Church is an outsider. The American Church is an immigrant institution in an historically Protestant culture, and up until the 1960s at least, enjoyed little public legitimacy (see Harper and LeBeau 1993). The Catholic Church in England is in the shadow of the formally established Protestant church (Hornsby-Smith 1987).

The other dimension of interest, that of the abortion policy environment, pairs the U.S. and Poland where abortion policy is a highly conflicted issue, and England and Ireland where abortion policy is relatively more settled — pro-choice in the case of the former, and pro-life in the latter. Legislative and judicial challenges and counter-challenges have been the hallmark of American abortion policy since the 1973 Roe decision. In Poland, although abortion has had wide legitimacy since its introduction in 1956 (see Fuszara 1991), legislation enacted in 1993, following a series of highly contested and emotionally charged political debates, imposed substantial restrictions on abortion against the opposition of many of its citizens (Siemienska 1994: 620-622).

In England, a national pro-choice consensus means that there have been only a few attempts made, unsuccessfully, to deliteralize the 1967 abortion law (Cohan 1986). Unlike England and Wales, Ireland has never had legal abortion, and its pro-life policy was affirmed by substantial majorities of the electorate in constitutional referenda in 1983 and 1992.

This study's first hypothesis assumes that, as argued by Harper and LeBeau (1993), in countries where the Church is an outsider it is confronted with greater external pressure to legitimate its institutional structure and practices. This means that the American and English bishops, relative to their Polish and Irish counterparts, are likely to make a stronger attempt to present the Church as a "normal" political actor accommodative of secular issues (see Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992: 10). One way of achieving this goal is to pay greater attention to scientific reasoning, and another is to acknowledge the autonomy of legislation from Catholic morality. Both these strategies, therefore, are expected to be used
more frequently by the bishops in the U.S. and England, than in either Ireland or Poland.

The second hypothesis is based on the argument (following Seidler and Meyer 1989) that in monopoly religious contexts the Church tends to be “lazier” than in pluralistic religious economies (see Seidler and Meyer 1989; Finke and Stark 1992). Applying this thesis to the abortion issue suggests that the Church should be more culturally inclusive in countries where abortion policy is competitively contested than in countries that have moral consensus on abortion. The second hypothesis, therefore, assumes that the Church’s use of culturally inclusive arguments will be higher in the U.S. and Poland than in England or Ireland. In particular, it may be the case that, following Weber (1946: 178), the traditional unifying bond of shared nationality will lead the Church to rely more heavily on themes of national identity in the U.S. and Poland, where the status of abortion is comparatively more contested, than in Ireland and England.

In a more exploratory fashion, I also investigate whether the Church’s discourse articulates with the cultural framing of abortion as a “woman’s right.” Once again, Seidler and Meyer’s (1989) notion of a “lazy” institution leads us to expect that the Church will be more active in addressing the concerns of women in countries where there is a tradition of access to legal abortion. Thus the Church in Poland, England, and the U.S., unlike in Ireland where abortion is illegal, is expected to show awareness of the practical dilemmas that its teaching poses for women.

Alternatively, however, it may be that the political culture associated with liberal, democratic capitalism makes the language of individual rights more accessible in western societies than in Eastern European countries that have been part of the Socialist bloc. This suggests that it will be the Polish, and not the Irish, bishops who are less likely to discuss abortion and women’s situation.

By way of review, this study anticipates that if the Church’s insider/outsider status influences the sorts of anti-abortion arguments it uses, the American and English discourses should be similar; if the political climate surrounding abortion policy affects the Church’s arguments, there should be a similar pattern of cultural engagement in the U.S. and Poland. The study also explores the Church’s use of women-oriented themes.

**METHOD**

The abortion statements issued by the national bishops’ conference in each country chosen constitute the materials used in the analysis. The documents included: (a) all of the statements issued by the Irish episcopate with respect to the 1983 and 1992 “pro-life” referenda (total number of paragraphs, N = 45); (b) all of the abortion-related statements issued by the Polish episcopate between 1989, when change in the Polish law was first broached, and 1992, prior to Parliament’s passing of legislation in January 1993 deliberalizing the law (total number of paragraphs, N = 27); and (c) two statements of the English episcopate — one issued in 1980 coinciding with the failure of the Corrie Bill in the House of Commons in 1980, considered the most serious challenge to the 1967 law (Lovenduski 1986:55), and one issued in 1993 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of
the 1967 Abortion Act (total number of paragraphs, \( N = 35 \)). Because of the greater number of abortion-policy statements issued by the American episcopal conference, a sample of its statements was selected so as to reflect the major policy shifts in the American abortion debate. These statements included the U.S. bishops' response to the 1973 USSC Roe v. Wade decision; its response to the 1976 USSC Planned Parenthood v. Danforth decision rejecting as unconstitutional proposed restrictions on abortion; and its 1989 resolution on abortion responding to the Supreme Court's Webster v. Reproductive Health Services decision acknowledging states' interests in regulating abortion (total number of paragraphs, \( N = 37 \)).

The statements of each episcopal conference were coded independently by two coders, one of whom was unaware of the focus of the study and the source of the materials. The coding categories were doctrinal legitimation, which included explicit references to Scripture, Christian or Catholic teaching, Vatican II, Pope John Paul II, and cultural argumentation comprised of four sub-categories: (i) The relationship between law and morality (ii) Scientific authority; (iii) National identity; and (iv) Women's socio-economic situation.

**FINDINGS**

**Quantitative analysis**

The Church in all four countries relied more heavily on cultural than doctrinal sources of legitimation in publicly articulating its opposition to abortion (see Table 1). There was no statistically significant variation in this pattern \( (x^2 = 2.10, df = 3, \text{n.s.}) \).

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legitimation Sources</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>U.S.A.</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( N ) (%)</td>
<td>( N ) (%)</td>
<td>( N ) (%)</td>
<td>( N ) (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctrine</td>
<td>6 (16)</td>
<td>6 (17)</td>
<td>11 (25)</td>
<td>10 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>31 (84)</td>
<td>30 (83)</td>
<td>33 (75)</td>
<td>27 (74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture: Law/morality</td>
<td>21 (68)</td>
<td>17 (57)</td>
<td>16 (49)</td>
<td>9 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture: Science</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture: National identity</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>10 (33)</td>
<td>9 (27)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture: Women's situation</td>
<td>9 (29)</td>
<td>2 (7)</td>
<td>7 (21)</td>
<td>14 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31 (100)</td>
<td>30 (100)</td>
<td>33 (100)</td>
<td>27 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall Doctrine \( \times \) Culture: \( x^2 = 2.10, df = 3, \text{n.s.} \)

Overall Culture: \( x^2 = 37.6, df = 9, p < .05 \)

Note: Translation of the Polish documents by Krzysztof Zablocki was underwritten by a grant from the Social Science Faculty Research Fund, Yale University.
There were significant cross-national differences, however, in the Church's use of cultural arguments ($x^2 = 37.6$, df = 9, $p < .05$). In Ireland, Poland, and the U.S., the bishops' most frequently invoked themes referred to the relationship between law and morality, whereas the theme of women's situation, seconded by discussion of the law/morality relationship, predominated in the English arguments. Appeals to scientific legitimation were infrequent across all jurisdictions (total number of appeals = 7) but were most prevalent in the English case. The American and Polish discourses were remarkable for the frequency of appeal to national identity. The virtual absence of references to women in the Polish arguments is also noteworthy (see Table 1).

**Qualitative analysis**

1. **Doctrinal legitimation** The doctrinal sources ranged from specific references to Scripture (Polish, Irish, and American bishops), Vatican II (English and American bishops), and Pope John Paul II (Irish, Polish, and English bishops), to general appeals to Christian and Catholic teaching, most evident in the statements of the English bishops. Scriptural references were used to affirm the sanctity of life, as in the Irish bishops' (1992) quotation from the Book of Psalms: "For it was you who created my being, knit me together in my mother's womb," or the American bishops' affirmation of the Deuteronomic command to "choose life" (1973). The Polish bishops condemned abortion by invoking the Fifth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," and reiterated that observance of this commandment is one of the "crucial tests of one's belief in God" (1989). All of the conferences invoked Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary in praying for an end to legal abortion and a restoration of respect for human life.

Vatican II's condemnation of abortion as a destructive, "unspeakable crime" was asserted by the English (1980) and American bishops (1989), while the words of Pope John Paul II were used to declare the inviolability of human life (Polish bishops, 1989) and to challenge people to protect the sanctity of life (Irish bishops, 1983). More generally, the English bishops argued, for example, that "Catholic teaching on abortion accords with principles of moral reasonableness," and that "Catholic teaching" on abortion simply constitutes a defense of innocent life (1980).

2. **Cultural legitimation: (i) Law and morality**

The relationship between law and morality was the most prevalent cultural theme and was addressed extensively by all four episcopates. Two patterns characterized its use. One was the inextricable connection between civil law and basic moral principles, and second was an emphasis on religious pluralism and freedom of conscience.

Typical of the arguments presented was the Irish bishops' (1983) stress on the function of law in protecting basic human rights. They argued that the "moral principle" of opposition to abortion was "not open to question" and did not "depend on a particular religious conviction" (1992b). It was the U.S. bishops who most forcefully articulated this argument, stating that legal abortion "is
wrong and is entirely contrary to the fundamental principles of morality... No court, no legislative body, no leader of government can legitimately assign less value to some human life” (1973). The Polish episcopate similarly argued that “bad legislation” constituted “a crime against public morality” (1990).

Therefore while, as the English bishops pointed out, “the Catholic Church does not ask that the law of the land should coincide in every respect with the moral law... or that Catholic moral teaching [be] adopted as public policy” (1980), the Church underscored, nonetheless, that “the innocent and weak” were entitled to the “equal protection of the law” (1980). In accordance with their understanding of the law’s obligation to protect “innocent life” (American bishops, 1989), each episcopal conference noted that the status of abortion as a legal right was “grossly unjust” (English bishops, 1980), that it threatened the “moral sanity of society” (Polish bishops, 1989), and led to increased public acceptability of the notion that “women have a moral right to abort their unborn children” (American bishops, 1989; Polish bishops, 1990; and Irish bishops, 1992).

An important aspect of the law/morality issue was the question of abortion and religious freedom. The English bishops noted the “full freedom of religious belief and practice” that existed in their society. They acknowledged that “many differing moral and political opinions are conscientiously held and pursued in practice,” and they affirmed that they did not wish to “over-ride the consciences of our fellow-citizens” (1980). Nonetheless, the English bishops pointed out that it was their right, as “members of a pluralistic society,” to appeal to the consciences of all citizens and political leaders in denouncing the immorality of abortion.

The American bishops also noted the divergence of public opinion on abortion, but stated that it was their “right and responsibility to help establish laws and social policies protecting the right to life of unborn children” (1989). Specifically addressing Catholics, the American bishops responded to the Roe decision by clearly stating that “Catholics must oppose abortion as an immoral act” (1973), a position they more forcefully articulated in 1989 when they declared that “No Catholic can responsibly take a ‘pro-choice’ stand when the ‘choice’ in question involved the taking of innocent human life.”

The Irish bishops, in contrast, while obviously operating in a different context, one in which abortion has been criminalized since 1861, were somewhat conciliatory in 1983 in the first of two pro-life constitutional amendment debates. While suggesting that some among those opposed to adding a pro-life amendment were “active pro-abortion groups,” the bishops stated, nonetheless: “We recognise the right of each person to vote according to conscience.” In a subsequent referendum in 1992, where two different, but nonetheless pro-life, amendment wordings were proposed, once again, the bishops clearly stated that “the intentional destruction of innocent human life was gravely wrong.” They noted, however, that “from a moral point of view, either [a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’] stance is tenable insofar as each is intended to reflect a total abhorrence of abortion” (1992).

The Polish bishops took the most uncompromising stance with regard to religious freedom on abortion, arguing that an issue of such moral import as “the
immutable right to life from the moment of conception” was not a question to be resolved by majority opinion. They argued:

On the subject of this law, no referendum can be carried out. A referendum can be carried out only in the domain of laws constituted by men. . . . Voting on legislation regarding the destruction of human life is not only incompatible with human rights but also violates the very order of nature (May 1991).

(ii) Science

Scientific legitimation was the least invoked source of cultural argumentation overall, and was used primarily by the English bishops. Bolstering Church teaching on abortion, they emphasized that “modern science enables us to see better than ever before the fundamental significance of the time of conception” (1980). The English bishops discussed the new knowledge about life development made available by scientists and medical technology, and the American bishops accused the Supreme Court of failing to understand this scientific evidence in its Roe v. Wade reasoning. The Polish bishops, on the other hand, appealed to scientists and other specialists to help in building up respect for human life (March 1989), while the Irish bishops, acknowledging the legitimacy accorded statistics, appealed for their “honest and impartial use” in debate about abortion (1992).

(iii) National identity

Appeals to national identity were evident only in the anti-abortion arguments of the American and the Polish bishops. The American bishops repeatedly linked the Church’s emphasis on the fundamental nature of the right-to-life to “our nation’s” (1989) tradition of protecting human rights in its laws, Constitution, and Declaration of Independence (1973, 1976, 1989). They argued, for example, that:

We believe with millions of our fellow Americans, that our American law and way of life comprise an obvious and certain recognition of the law of God, and that our legal system is both based in it, and must conform to it. The Declaration of Independence holds that . . . [t]he preamble to the Constitution establishes as one goal of the people of the United States . . . [w]ithout the right to life, no true liberty is possible (1973).

Specifically appealing to America’s distinct political tradition, the Church responded to the Supreme Court’s 1976 decision rejecting a challenge to Roe, by stating:

Only four days before our country prepares to celebrate the 200th anniversary of its commitment to the defense of the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . . [the Court’s decision] further imperils the right to life of the most helpless of God’s creatures (1976).
The Polish bishops framed the legalization of abortion as contrary to “the moral and biological well-being of the nation” (1989), and as placing the “state’s functioning in peril” (1990). The situation, therefore, must be redressed, the bishops argued, by voting for those who through their “univocal support for the defence of life” (1991) show that they are able to “undertake responsible tasks in the motherland” (1991) and have “concern for the well-being of Poland and respect for her traditions” (1991).

The Polish episcopate also referred to Poland’s past, including here an allusion to “the most radical countering of the right to life in the concentration camps” (1991). Unlike that of the American bishops, however, who celebrated the centrality of the right-to-life in the nation’s political tradition, the Polish bishops defined opposition to abortion as central to the “establishment of the long awaited new legal, moral, and political system” (1992). Observance of the “law of God,” they argued, is “decisive to the nation’s future” (1989), and constitutive of “integral reform” in the “construction of the new order in Poland” (1990). Reminding the Polish people of the Church’s organic association with the nation, the bishops noted that:

The many centuries long experience of the Church gives us premises to hope that at this moment too our nation will muster sufficient strength to be reborn, to open up towards new life (1992).

The bishops argued that protecting the right to life was in accordance with “the spirit of democracy” and would “free our country from the tragic legacy of intolerance and cruelty toward those completely defenceless” (1992).

(iv) Women’s situation

Each of the episcopal conferences discussed women in the context of the mothering role. In particular, the English, American, and Irish bishops elaborated on the range of social, economic, and psychological pressures associated with women’s unequal situation which can lead “expectant mothers” to have abortions. They each called for a societal commitment to policies that would alleviate these pressures, and were joined by the Polish bishops in urging compassionate understanding of pregnant women’s situation and sensitivity toward women who have had abortions. Thus, for example, regarding the 1992 Irish referendum, the Irish bishops asked that the debate be conducted in a way that would not be “insensitive” to “the particular pain of women who have had abortions” (1992), while the U.S. bishops acknowledged that: “We must hear the issues, the struggles, and the anguish of women who face issues in a way that we never will” (1989).

The bishops were clear, however, that “no motive can justify abortion” (Irish bishops, 1992), and reaffirmed Church teaching that even in the case of pregnancy resulting from rape or incest, abortion could never constitute an act of “moral reasonableness” (English bishops, 1980). Rather than conceding any legitimacy to the feminist case that abortion was a woman’s right, therefore, the bishops instead argued that a “woman’s right in respect of her own body” was not
unlimited, and that to the contrary, "A stand against abortion is a stand for humanity. It therefore involves a stand for women, particularly for those who are or who may be pregnant" (English bishops, 1980).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the discursive strategies used by the Catholic bishops in Ireland, Poland, the U.S., and England, in presenting their stance on abortion, an issue central to the contemporary Church’s institutional identity. In particular, I was interested in exploring whether the Church’s institutional status and the political climate surrounding abortion influenced the cultural arguments used by the Church to justify its universal opposition to abortion.

Hypothesis One postulated that the Church would deal with issues of institutional credibility arising from its outsider status by paying greater attention to religious pluralism in America and England than elsewhere. This, however, was not the case. In fact, discussion of the relationship between law and morality dominated each country’s discourse. The Church actively affirmed the autonomy between law and morality even in societies where it is an insider and where Catholic morality informs, however indirectly, legislative decisions (Ireland and Poland).

Given that in secular terms abortion is a socio-legal issue, perhaps it is not so surprising that the Church emphasized the law/morality theme across the different contexts. For the Church to differentiate between civil law and religious morality on abortion however, is, ultimately, a moot point, because fundamental to its teaching is the argument that civil laws should conform to the universal moral law.

In contrast, there was a dearth of appeals to scientific legitimation, with the relative exception of the English discourse. This pattern is contrary to the Church’s strategy in the American abortion debate overall (Dillon 1995), and in debates in America and elsewhere on other moral issues (Dillon 1993; Kowalewski 1993). The relative lack of scientific themes in the statements analyzed suggests that the Church can articulate culturally salient arguments on abortion that do not need to rely on scientific legitimation.

The study’s second hypothesis was supported by the data. The Church appealed to national cultural identity in the more ideologically contested American and Polish contexts, and did not do so in the more normatively settled, English and Irish situations. The American bishops invoked the nation’s past and the Polish bishops appealed to their nation’s future using arguments that affirmed unifying national bonds (Weber 1922/1946: 178). In both countries, the bishops emphasized the enduring centrality of a pro-life framework to each nation’s cultural destiny.

The salience of a “national canopy” (Demerath and Williams 1992: 296) in the American and Polish discourses suggests that in contemporary times, despite the awareness of intra-national cultural differences, the invocation of a common national identity is still seen as a useful legitimation strategy. Clearly, however, the meanings associated with appeals to national identity may vary from country
to country. Thus in the American case, while references to the nation’s tradition are consonant with its unbroken democratic history, in the case of post-Socialist Poland, references to the nation’s well-being bear strong resemblance, ironically, to the socialist ideology of the past. Linking the pro-life cause to themes of national cultural identity, therefore, may be a relatively more persuasive strategy in America than in contemporary Polish society, and, indeed, in the latter may have an unintended negative association, thus ultimately undermining the Church’s agenda.

Although the lack of reference to shared national symbols in the Irish and English discourses may be due to their relatively less conflicted abortion environments, it may also be the result of an interaction between national historical experiences and the Church’s status in the country. For example, although the Church in Ireland is an integral part of national culture, it may refrain from appealing to national symbols because of their connotation with nationalist politics and its attendant violence as exemplified by the conflict in Northern Ireland. By the same token, the outsider English Church may desist from invoking national symbols as a source of legitimation in order to avoid aligning itself with England’s imperialist past. In the United States, by contrast, the outsider Church has, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, created an institutional identity that demonstrated its patriotism by combining American national (e.g., the flag) and Catholic symbols (see Wangler 1985). In a less self-conscious manner, the fate of both the Polish nation and the Catholic Church have historically been intertwined in the struggle against imperialist powers (Davies 1984).

Finally, this study also explored how the Church dealt with the issue of abortion as a woman’s right. The American and English bishops used arguments similar to those of the Irish, notwithstanding the absence of legal abortion in Ireland. The Polish bishops, however, departed from the pattern evinced by their fellow-bishops and, at least in the document sample used in this study, gave scant attention to women’s situation.

The lack of reference to women by the Polish bishops may be a reflection of both the relative cultural marginalization of individual rights in ex-socialist Poland, and of the greater organizational fragmentation of its national women’s lobby (see Fuszara 1991; Siemieniaska 1994). It may also reflect the Polish Church’s attempt to negate the relevance of feminist issues to the nation’s new agenda.

Irrespective, however, of whether or not they acknowledged women, none of the bishops’ conferences discussed abortion in a way that acknowledged mainstream feminists’ understanding of abortion as a moral choice. Thus, the Church’s use of gendered arguments, just as its use of national cultural themes, highlights the way in which organizations can selectively appropriate cultural symbols and resources in the legitimation of an institutional agenda that, at least on abortion, can be at odds with the prevailing practices in a particular society.
REFERENCES


