The context of this paper is my long-term research project analyzing the role of Catholicism in contemporary Nicaragua in defining women, women’s roles, and their rights, especially reproductive rights. I am looking at the role of the Catholic Church as an institution in national policies in Nicaragua and its influence on the country’s international policies, especially in the context of the most recent UN conferences on population, development, and women. I will speak to the Nicaragua context directly, but I start with a lengthy discussion on the complicated relationship between feminist studies and religious studies, which has relevance not only to my case study but also to Latin American feminist studies in general.

My main argument is that without an adequate analysis of the role of religion, in this case especially that of the Catholic Church, it is hard, if not impossible, to fully understand the dynamic between women’s social status, their sexual and reproductive rights and poverty.
Social scientific research on religion and women is often guided by two opposite stereotypes. On the one hand, there is a kind of feminist “blindness” of, or resistance to, the importance of religion for women, especially in its possible positive or liberatory aspects, even when women from different religious traditions claim this to be true for them. On the other hand, there is a “religious paradigm” type of feminist studies in which women are seen mainly or only through the lense of religion, especially in research done by Western scholars on Muslim and Third World countries, or at least on a culture and tradition which is not one´s own. For example, Islam may be seen as the almost sole signifier of women´s lives in certain countries by an outsider scholar who denies or is blind to the importance and weight of her own religious traditions, in most cases the various branches of Christianity. Thus, some countries may be labeled as “Muslim” whereas Western European cultures hardly are explained as being “Christian”.¹ I am not sure, if Catholicism is less “other” to feminist research than Islam. I think it is more about the interplay between our relationship to our own culture and how we then approach other cultures. In the “Christian” world, it may be about a simultaneous embracing of secularization, on the one hand, and a kind of contemporary rootlessness in one´s own culture, on the other hand. But if one lacks a sophisticated understanding of one´s own religious background, how can one understand religions of other cultures?

The above mentioned polarity of stereotypes has some interesting and important consequences for women, feminism, and feminist studies. I only will mention three; I am sure there are more. First, the real historical, social, political, and ethical importance of a given religious tradition is negated, because secularization is considered to have won over religion in modern societies, when in fact the kind of secularization that social scientists have predicted to happen has in fact happened only in

¹ More on this dilemma, see Sakaranaho 1998 on the Middle East and Turkey. She shows how “the religious paradigm” is related to Orientalism in which Islam is seen as an immutable and stagnant belief system, and how most academic feminist studies take place within this paradigm.
Western Europe. From a global perspective, including the “Christian” Latin America, European development is rather an exception in need of explanation than the other way around.²

Second, many people in different cultures are deprived of their agency when their religious traditions are considered immutable and unchangeable. In a contradictory way, the historical developments of Christianity, including people’s active resistance to certain religious beliefs and practices over the centuries, are taken for granted even if forgotten, whereas contemporary forms of Islam or Catholicism are seen as powerful, immutable power systems over people’s decision making and possibilities to change them. The dialogue and critique inside these religious traditions are ignored, probably for the very reason that it is not very much known or studied by Western, secularized social scientists. There is also an apparent lack of dialogue between social scientists and theologians and other scholars of religion.

Third, we are witnessing a rise of fundamentalism in major religious traditions. This “social fundamentalism”³ is creating new political alliances between, for example, the Vatican and some Muslim countries, especially in issues that have to do with women’s rights. If at the same time there is a feminist inability to analyze this phenomenon adequately, which includes taking seriously women’s own positive identities as “Muslim” or “Catholic”, and if we only see secularization as the inevitable path for everybody in the world, we are not able to understand the complex and often contradictory relationship between women and their religious traditions, identities and beliefs.

What all this means is that if (feminist) scholars see established religion only as oppressive or backward, they are easily operating within the same polarized framework characterizing the most

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² Casanova 1994, pp. 19-29. This does not mean that there wouldn’t have happened any secularization inside, let’s say, the United States or Mexico. What Casanova wants to say is that it has not happened in the amount and in the way that many social scientists were predicting.

³ Hawley 1999, 4.
conservative sectors of different religious traditions. There is no space for a critical dialogue, because the other side (feminists by the fundamentalist elites, them by feminists) is seen as inherently dangerous, wrong or perverted.

In other words, I am arguing for a nuanced, critical, comprehensive understanding of the interplay of women’s lives and religious traditions. A feminist perspective should not only include a feminist (re)interpretation of those religious traditions, done by adequate tools of analysis. There is a large group of feminist scholars from different religious backgrounds realizing that task. A feminist perspective should also be careful about not judging religion as _per se_ oppressive for women, without listening to the different voices of real women all over the world who are balancing between their identities as women and their places in religious communities.

In the case of Christianity, this means that there must be a simultaneous effort of well-based critique of its important role in women’s subordination throughout the centuries, and openness to the possibilities of feminist reinterpretations of Christianity, even if we would not agree on the need for or the possible consequences of this kind of feminist scholarship. Even if there would be no need for feminists to “save” different religious traditions for women, I think it is important to be able to critically analyze the social and political role religious institutions and traditions have in the contemporary world. In Latin America, the Catholic Church is far from being a marginal institution, even though it has lost its colonial power. In some countries, conservative Catholics and politically powerful elites are forming new alliances – as a kind of modern continuation of the colonial _patronato_ system – between the church and the state. Nicaragua is one of the clearest examples of this dynamic. I will come back to it later in this paper.
It has been surprising for me over the years to realize how feminist studies in religion are often neglected by feminist theorists in other fields. The reasons for and the consequences of this need to be analyzed more fully than I am able to do within the scope of my paper. Nevertheless, I want to point out two problems with this neglect of feminist studies in religion.

First, not only is an important, scrutinized, and critical body of research on religion (not only Christianity) excluded from much of social sciences, but it may be the very part of religious studies that has most importance today if we want to understand the dynamic between religion and society. As was said earlier, the whole controversy about religious fundamentalism and religiously motivated political conflicts, has often at its center the different understandings of human rights, especially those of women. Second, Western feminist social science excludes from “feminism” and “feminist theory” important voices of women, who are not willing to give up their religious traditions but who are also at the forefront of changing and challenging them, often in extremely difficult circumstances.

All this is somewhat but not drastically different in Latin America and Latin American studies worldwide. Theologians, especially liberation theologians, are far more often considered as important participants in intellectual debates in Latin America than in Europe or in the United States. When it comes to Latin American feminist theology, I have noticed, it is only a handful of feminist theologians outside Latin America who know about the Latin American variant of feminist theology (or the feminist variant of Latin American liberation theology). Male Latin American intellectuals, theologians or non-theologians, do not always read their feminist colleagues, even less so if these are religious (nuns, pastors, etc.). Latin American feminist scholars, inside or outside Latin America, do not often even know that there exists something called Latin American feminist theology. Definitely, they are not usually quoted in feminist studies in and on Latin America.
However, this situation is not only the fault of the social sciences or of single Latin Americanists. Theologians – or scholars of religion - easily create a discourse of their own, which at its best is very abstract and theoretical, at its worst, incomprehensible to anybody without theological education. Theologians, liberationist or feminist, in spite of all their impetus toward society and culture, have not been eager to enter into a debate with non-theological discourses. Outside the academy, the relationship of feminist and other “progressive” theologians to social movements, including the feminist movement worldwide, is scarce and superficial. Still today, academic theologians are too easily projecting and imposing their faith commitments on scholarly work and people from other fields.

However, if liberation theology in Latin America in the 1970s was one important interlocutor in grassroots social movements, today this hardly is true, and these movements important to liberation theology in fact never included the feminist movement. This seems to be a strong claim. Let me clarify it briefly.

Women’s movements and feminist movements

Women’s concerns, expressed by feminist movements, have been “the irruption within the irruption of the poor” in the context of socio-political movements, often leftist in Latin America. This has been true both in secular movements and in religiously inspired movements such as liberation theology and the popular church. Similarly as in Middle Eastern countries⁴, Latin American leftist movements and discourses have been quick to see feminism and the critique of sexism as belonging
to the minority of middle-class women of the West. This attitude has had serious effects on both the
development of women´s movements and on the fate of possible socialist experiments in Latin
America. Liberation theology – a movement with strong ties both to Latin American left and grass-
roots activism and the Catholic Church – by and large can be included in this group, unable or
unwilling to speak of the poor also as gendered, reproductive beings. Even when seen as an issue, it
has been supposed that as soon as a (socialist) revolution is a reality, women´s gender-specific
problems will be automatically solved as well. The Sandinista revolution of Nicaragua is one of the
examples of this not being the case.⁵

The history of women´s movements and feminism(s) in Latin America has been documented in
various contexts.⁶ Contemporary Latin American feminists form but one part of a larger,
multifaceted, socially and politically heterogeneous women´s movement. A distinction between
“feminine” and “feminist” women´s organizations has been commonly made by both movement
participants and social scientists.⁷ The former, movimientos de mujeres or movimientos femeninos,
cover everything from women-led human rights organizations to collective day-to-day survival
strategies (communal kitchens, health and child care services etc.).

The conflicts and opposition between these two politically active women´s movements have shaped
the specific characteristics of Latin American feminism(s). In the 1990s, they have come closer to
each other, creating a distinctive Latin American feminism with a wide political agenda. It may be
unnecessary today to draw clear-cut lines between the two types of women´s movements. In fact,
according to Tessa Cubitt and Helen Greenslade,

⁴ Al-Ali 1997, pp. 174, 182. “(...) feminism is being associated with the West – hence alien and suspect – **within Islamic and leftist discourses alike**. This perception has been largely internalized by many contemporary women activists (…).” Ibid., p. 174 (emphasis mine).
⁷ Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992, p. 401.
the considerable body of research that shows a more complex picture of modern social settings than the
dichotomized separate spheres [of the public and private] model has important implications for
understanding women´s political action and consciousness. The material which indicates growing
empowerment suggests women´s awareness of gender subordination is gained through participation in social
movements.”

The new social movements of Latin America⁹, including the movimiento feminista, have not been the
movements that liberation theology has felt affinity with. Liberation theologians have been
closer to the political and ideological aims and presuppositions of the movimientos de mujeres than
of an explicitly feminist movement. The former have been both practically and ideologically tied to
the Latin American Left, including the progressive wing of the Catholic Church. Many of the day-
to-day resistance strategies of Latin America´s popular classes were in fact born in church-based
organizations.¹⁰ Because of liberation theologians´ concern for and commitment to the poorest and
the most vulnerable in society, they have felt closer to a women´s movement that explicitly deals
with such burning issues as living conditions, nutrition, work, and health. More “classic” feminist
issues such as sexuality, reproduction, and violence against women, have been on these movements´
agenda in a more subtle form. However, as Amy Conger Lind points out, women´s basic need are
not tied solely to survival but rather to constructions of identity and relations of power.¹¹ For many
women, issues of violence are tied intimately to their reproductive role and poverty.

The distinction between “feminine” and “feminist” has been present in Latin American women´s
theological production, as well. Not all female liberation theologians have wanted to label their

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⁸ Cubitt and Greenslade 1997, p. 57.
¹⁰ Castañeda 1993, p. 259.
work as “feminist”. The most common way of naming women’s theological production has been *teología desde [la perspectiva de] la mujer*. However, since mid 1990s, there has been a growing group of theologians who explicitly define their work as Latin American feminist theology of liberation (*teología feminista latinoamericana de la liberación*). They consciously depart from concepts such as “feminine”.¹²

What this means is that a feminist interest in and concern for the role of religion, especially Catholicism, has been mainly expressed by theologically educated women, both Catholic and Protestant. Some of them are nuns and pastors. Studies done on the contradictions of middle-class feminism and *movimientos de mujeres* usually do not see this one missing link: Latin American feminist theologians or feminists within existing churches, familiar with religious language and values, who can speak from the praxis of women from the popular classes in a way that more secularized feminists cannot. Thus, it is extremely important that there are such persons and groups who can form alliances with the kind of “new” social movements that Sonia Alvarez and Arturo Escobar speak about.

Feminist movement and religious women

When the Catholic Church in Latin America is portrayed by feminists as the “archenemy” – for understandable reasons – many Latin American women will feel alienated not from the church but from that feminist discourse and practice that demonizes the church. This is because, in spite of all the real weight of patriarchalism and sexism on women in the church and women’s consciousness of it, these women often have a more nuanced, critical and deeper understanding of religion than their feminist sisters outside all established religion. One example of this is the image of Virgin

Mary which outside the churches and critical study of religion is too easily explained as “a syndrome”\(^\text{13}\) which, like a sickness, spreads out in the female population and make them passive victims of it. Another example, again of Virgin Mary, is the well-known and much quoted article by Evelyn Stevens on “machismo and marianismo” in which the “Mary myth” is seen to be the main and almost sole source of Latin American women’s “martyrdom”:\(^\text{14}\) In fact, women – and maybe especially the poorest and the most uneducated ones – have a far more subversive image of the Virgin Mary than secular feminists or conservative male patriarchs in the church ever could have thought. Even when the traditional image and use of the Virgin Mary figure is apparently sexist, even misogynist, an outright labeling of it as only a “syndrome” that women suffer, praising virginity and motherhood as the woman’s most important, if not only, qualities, does not take into account the ability of women to interpret religious tradition according to their own needs and aspirations.\(^\text{15}\)

Many women feel the need for **both** a non-sexist interpretation of their religious traditions – and, in fact, try to do so – and for a feminism which would be less black-and-white and hostile about religion and which would stop seeing women for whom religion is important as the most alienated ones in need of a feminist savior. In an extreme form, there are similarities between religious fundamentalists and anti-fundamentalist feminists. Both tend to see women as passive recipients of brainwashing, and both see religious institutions and traditions mainly as men’s territory – for the former, women better keep silent, for the latter, leave the religious institutions. Nevertheless, there are women who refuse to do none: they stubbornly stay in their religious communities, but do not keep silent about their oppression as women.

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\(^{13}\) See e.g. Berglund et al. 1997, p. 6 and Melhuus 1990.

\(^{14}\) Stevens 1973.

\(^{15}\) For a possible feminist reinterpretation of Virgin Mary in the Latin American context, see Vuola 1993.
Women have different ways of opposing cultural stereotypes concerning them, including some of those represented by the feminist movement. This sort of stereotypical image of poor women as the passive victims of religious indoctrination is one of the most common ones, not only in the case of Islam but Catholicism as well. This is especially true in issues of sexuality and sexual identity. One of the most powerful ways of women’s resistance has always been the reinterpretation and reappropriation of sexist religious practices and theories for their own ends. I am not saying this is a good or the best strategy for women’s liberation – I may even be willing to admit that it is to spend too much energy on something for which you don’t have any guarantee of change. However, this does not mean that I wouldn’t be able to see that for many women in different societies their religious identities are intimately tied to their identities as women, even as resistant or rebellious women.

When it comes to reproductive rights and issues of sexuality, it is obvious that the Catholic Church is the single most important power factor in these issues in Latin America. As a scholar of religion I would say that the Catholic monopoly in sexual ethics and values concerning it must be met and challenged by adequate tools of analysis. Neither secular feminist movement nor Catholic women without any formal education (especially in theology) meet this need. Very much the same can be said of the most prominent liberation theologians, both male and female, who keep silent about issues of sexuality and reproduction.16

It is this silence and the cultural taboos around issues of sexuality that create the strange situation where women simultaneously consider themselves as good Catholics, embrace the Catholic teaching on contraception and abortion, but in reality use contraception and abort when necessary. The amount of shame and inner conflict for a woman after an illegal abortion (when it did not kill

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16 See Vuola 1997 and 2001 for a more comprehensive analysis of liberation theologians’ relation to issues of sexuality, feminism, and reproduction.
her) is of course a direct result of a sexual ethic that is not based on from women´s everyday, concrete experiences and needs, but it may be intensified with a kind of feminist discourse which does not understand and take into account the importance of the Catholic tradition for these women. Seen from these women´s perspective, they are in a situation where nobody understands them fully. As ironical as it may sound, sometimes the persons who come closest to understanding them are Catholic, feminist-orientated nuns. It is maybe no wonder, then, that the first person in Latin America to speak openly on the need for decriminalization of abortion from within the church and liberation theology has been Ivone Gebara, a Catholic nun working with poor women in Northeastern Brazil.  

Feminist interpretations too easily see Catholic women as passive recipients of religiously founded images of selfhood and sexuality. Here again they may come close to the most conservative sectors of the church. These polarized explanations omit the practices of agency and the experiences of conflicting images of selfhood in women, both individually and collectively. This may lead to researchers seeing women as a homogeneous group of “poor Third World women”, passive victims of colonialism, misogynist religions, and sexism.  

I am not arguing that there would not be anthropological or sociological research on Latin American women that would not take religion into account or would analyze it only in this stereotypical, polarized way. Scholars such as Carol Ann Drogus, John Burdick and Elizabeth Brusco, have been doing pioneering research in combining religion into both social sciences and gender studies. However, I still would claim that there is not enough knowledge of or communication between feminist scholarship in religion – including theology – and social scientific Latin American studies.

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17 Gebara was submitted to an ecclesiastical process of either retracting her statement on the legalization of abortion or facing dismissal from her religious order.
Feminist critique of religion

Not only Muslim feminists consider their religion as patriarchal. What feminist scholars of religion share globally is a view of (at least) all major religions as profoundly patriarchal. There are differences about the amount and character of this patriarchalism, as well as about the consequences it has for women. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have more in common in their image of women (and in the often concomitant devaluation of human sexuality) than they have differences. This is of course due to historical reasons, but as was said in the beginning of this article, this is also a practical point of convergence between the contemporary fundamentalist sectors of these religions.

Thus, it is no surprise that both religious feminists and feminist scholars on religion stress the importance of the access to theological education for women and the possibility this opens to an adequate interpretation of sacred texts and religious and ethical beliefs from women’s perspective. This is especially important in societies where religious elites control or strongly influence national legislation and politics. At the same time, the lack of this sort of discourse is striking at least in Latin America and most Muslim countries.

There are four important issues here. **First**, a feminist critique of religion stresses the dismantling of religious legitimization for certain political and cultural practices and beliefs. **Second**, it critically analyzes the power structures of religious communities, such as theological education, access to positions of power, right to interpretation, and so on. And **third**, it reminds us that there is no one

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Christianity or Islam but different forms and interpretations of them, and that these religious communities are internally divided; and; fourth, that the determinant role of religion in society should be questioned. Thus, a critical analysis of religion is important, but women’s struggle (or the struggle about democracy in general) is not only with religion.

We should also be aware of the influence of given religious systems behind our understanding of right and wrong and of our image of human being. In the case of women and our rights,

“the interreligious, global dialogue between women is revealing that for women there seems to be a vital connection between social justice and religion. Many women are realizing that an understanding of religious issues is basic to changing the situation of women. A culture’s religious traditions are its basis for meaning-making, image-making, and creating an ordered world. Religious images, including images of women, are profoundly influential in determining attitudes toward women. The fight for women’s rights in the secular arena will be weakened if it fails to acknowledge the religious dimension of the problem.”

Religion, Population Policies and Reproductive Rights in Latin America

In this part of the paper, I concentrate on issues of reproductive rights in Latin America, largely based on my dissertation and another more practically orientated research I carried out in Nicaragua.

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19 O’Neill 1990, pp. 54-55. Similarly, Abdullahi An-Na’im says, “If the advocates of the human rights of women fail to take religious discourse seriously, their opponents will mobilize it in Islamic communities, thereby denying them the vital political and practical support of those constituencies.” An-Na’im 1995, p. 54.
In the course of international population policies, the nature of the problems perceived in the North has been expressed plainly: the growing population of the South is a threat to the supply of resources necessary to the economy; there is a potential of large protest movements against international economic order; rapid population growth is a primary cause of the Third World's problems, notably hunger, environmental destruction, economic stagnation, and political instability. Thus, people must be persuaded - or forced, if necessary - to have fewer children. Birth control services can be "delivered" to Third World women in a top-down fashion, even in the absence of basic health-care systems.

Against the argumentation of most population organizations and many international aid agencies, Hartmann says - joining feminist analyses both in the North and the South - that rapid population control is not the root cause of development problems, but rather it is a symptom of them. According to Hartmann, overpopulation is one of the most pervasive myths in Western society, which makes it possible to blame the poor for their poverty and make those who have the least power of all, the poor women and their children of the Third World, responsible for issues that are far beyond their control. It makes these women mere wombs to be controlled.

The Catholic Church has officially adopted some of the language of dissident Latin American liberation theologians (and feminism, as well) in its discourse on sexual ethics. When speaking of "demographic imperialism" (imperialismo demográfico or imperialismo anticonceptivo), a term

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24 Ibid., p. xx. See also Amalric and Banuri 1994, pp. 693, 696. They point out that population growth is a consequence of bad health, limited education, and patriarchy, not the problem itself. At the local level, population growth is often a solution to problems, not a problem in itself.

coined by Latin American Catholic bishops in their meeting in Santo Domingo in 1992, and condemning coercive birth control practices in the Third World - including dangerous contraceptives and forced or unconsulted sterilizations - the Vatican joins many Third World intellectuals and activists who have good grounds for their suspicion of the motives behind global population policies. Nevertheless, in condemning both "artificial" contraception and abortion and in adopting the absolute "right-to-life" position only in the context of reproductive issues, the Vatican is a long way from the concerns of the women's movement. According to Hartmann,

"The population control and antiabortion philosophies, although diametrically opposed, share one thing in common: They are both antiwomen. Population control advocates impose contraception and sterilization on women; the so-called Right to Life movement denies women the basic right of access to abortion and birth control. Neither takes the interests and rights of the individual woman as their starting point. Both approaches attempt to control women, instead of letting women control their bodies themselves."  

Similarly, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky says:

"These fundamentalist forces (with the Vatican in the lead) also make a spurious claim to speak for the countries of the South in their struggle to change global economic relations and their opposition to cultural imperialism, including 'Western feminism'. In this way, moral conservatism and social and economic restructuring get oddly lumped together, and feminists who speak out in favour of reproductive and sexual rights or women's bodily self-determination, whatever country they are from, find themselves accused of fronting for the interests of Northern governments and donor agencies." 

26 On Latin American examples of coercive sterilization operations, see Hartmann 1995, pp. 247-251.


It is fairly common that a fundamentalist interpretation of women’s rights is justified by cultural differences (so called cultural relativism). Human rights, especially women’s rights, are seen as a form of Western imperialism which pretends to legitimize the cultural superiority of the West. This is especially true in some Muslim countries, but more and more one can hear this sort of arguments being expressed in Latin American Catholic countries as well. Thus, it is not only about Christianity as the religion of the “West” and Islam as the religion of the “East”, but also about the growing gap between the “North” and the “South”. The Church of the “West”, the Catholic Church, is thus seen as defending and representing the “South” inside Latin America, emphasizing its cultural differences to the Church in Europe. The secularized North, with its moral decline and lack of values, is seen as controlling the South, where values concerning the family and the patriarchal social order, are considered so central that without them the entire culture is in danger to collapse. This explains partly why feminism – both the one born in the industrialized countries and a more indigenous feminism – is experienced as such a threat, and even the principal sign of social degradation.

This is also the context in which the activity and collaboration of certain Muslim governments and the Vatican becomes more understandable. Especially during the current pope, John Paul II, the Vatican has become a strange mixture of one of the most Eurocentric (or rather “Vaticentric”) institutions in strictly Church-related issues in which all the orders come from above, from Europe (e.g. the nomination of conservative bishops against the preference of the local churches in Latin America, the silencing and expulsion of liberation theologians, a direct and open political pressure on national governments, especially in issues of sexual ethics) and of an institution which pretends to represent the weak, the poor, the South, in the larger society, both nationally and internationally. This observation is also made by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, in the context of the UN

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29 In this paper, I am not taking into account the growth of mostly US based Protestantism in the region, since my primary interest is in the political role of Catholicism in reproductive issues.
Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, in 1994: “But the Vatican also invoked
the counterclaim of cultural imperialism, charging that Westerners were attempting to impose
immoral and inappropriate ideologies […]”\textsuperscript{30}

"The culture of death" and "the defense of life" are now some of the favorite concepts for the pope,
Latin American Catholic bishops, liberation theologians, and feminists alike. They share with each
other the critique of a development model, which is based on unlimited growth, and its impacts
especially in the Third World. In reproductive issues, they share the conviction that many of the
population programs realized in the South, including Latin America, have not served human ends.
They can also agree that it is the poor women and children of the Third World who suffer most.

Nevertheless, none of the first three looks at the concrete situation of those women and children.
They do not take a critical look at the limits of real possibilities of choice women have in a
patriarchal culture. They want to defend the rights of the poor to education, health, employment,
and a decent standard of living, but without asking how poverty is connected to reproduction and
women's status. It is the very interconnection of these factors that informs the feminist point of
view, both in the secular feminist movement and in feminist theology. What both secular and reli-
gious feminists share is their emphasis on the real-life conditions of real women, especially the most
vulnerable of them.

The Catholic hierarchy and groups close to it are launching campaigns against any political, social,
or legal changes that might question the traditional teaching. Having lost much of its legitimacy and
power in issues of sexual ethics in European Catholic countries (Italy, the Vatican’s front yard, has

\textsuperscript{30} Keck and Sikkink 1998, p. 189.
the lowest birth rate in the world), the Vatican has turned to Latin America as a region not yet lost to secularism. Similarly, in all Catholic countries, including Latin American, ordinary people in fact do not necessarily follow the official teaching. One of the ways in which the Vatican has tried to compensate this loss of influence over individuals is its growing activity in international secular circles - be it UN conferences, international finance institutions or national governments.

The latter is especially clear in Latin America where the Catholic Church is considered the most important pressure group against governmental support of family planning programs, not to speak of legalization of abortion.

Nicaragua and the Vatican roulette

Nicaragua is the poorest of the Central American countries. The larger socio-economic situation (including reproductive health issues) of the country has been recorded and analyzed in several other settings and the material is easily available. Thus, in this paper I will rather concentrate on looking at the recent political changes, including the relationship between government and civil society, in relation to the situation of women and the discourse on reproductive rights.

In Nicaragua, the correlation between poverty and (lack of) reproductive rights and the overall situation of women and children stands out clearly. Maternal and infant mortality are both extremely high. Nicaragua also is an interesting example of the complicated dynamics between the government, the civil society (including a very vocal feminist movement) and religious institutions.
The Sandinista revolution (1979) created great hopes both in Nicaragua and abroad for major socio-political changes, among others the women's situation. The realities and actual effects of the ten years of Sandinista rule have since been widely analyzed. The necessity to do so became acute after the 1990 elections in which Sandinistas lost the power to the National Opposition Union (UNO) and Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was elected president (as the first female president in the country's history). Since 1997, the liberal government of president Arnoldo Alemán has been in power.

The Sandinista revolution signified a transformation of many aspects in Nicaraguan society, among them, the treatment of women. Women became the "object" of new legislation and their specific problems were discussed. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) introduced a body of new legislation and created a number of specific departments to give institutional continuity to its ideals. The party developed a two-pronged strategy: on the one hand, it attempted to mobilize political support for women's issues, and on the other, it initiated legislative reform.31 The Sandinista women's organization AMNLAE (*Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza*) was formed right after the triumph of the revolution.

However, today most analysts can agree with Anna M. Fernández Poncela that

"in the 1980s, the Sandinista government promoted only nominal and formal equality between men and women. Through the transformation of the economic structures of production, the political system, and social organization, gender relations that linked women's reproductive functions to domestic subordination, and the symbolism that legitimated that connection, remained effectively intact. [...] There was only a minimal transition in the social role of the Nicaraguan woman ..."32

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The Sandinista defeat in the 1990 elections is sometimes linked to women's frustration. One of the laws that the Sandinista government left intact was the criminalization of abortion, in order not to create more conflicts with the Catholic Church hierarchy. Both the food shortages caused by the U.S. blockade and the loss of children in the war were direct causes for women's discontent with the Sandinista era.\textsuperscript{33}

During the 1980s, and especially during the contra war, the Catholic hierarchy was the forefront of the internal opposition to the Sandinistas. Both due to this and the anti-imperialist revolutionary pro-natalist rhetoric of the FSLN, the Sandinistas were reluctant to make any changes in the abortion law, in spite of the demands of women from within their own ranks. Undoubtedly, this conflict is one of the reasons why the first NGOs in the end of 1980s that were not linked to FSLN were women's organizations. These same organizations were born out of a critical distance to AMNLAE and the kind of feminism it represented. Organizations like IXCHEN simultaneously expressed a more critical kind of feminist discourse and started concrete projects related to women's health. This is one expression of how feminism and issues of reproductive rights have gone hand in hand in Nicaragua, the apparent reason being the alarming statistics of high maternal mortality and women's bad reproductive health situation in general. Today there are several similar kind of NGOs with clinics which aim at an integral approach to women and their situation.

In fact, the amount and high professionality of NGOs related to women's situation (and to other issues, of course, as well) are a product of two related, albeit contradictory, factors. On the one hand, the ten years of Sandinism strengthened people's ability to organize themselves politically around issues relevant to them. On the other hand, the high level of centralization and the inability

\textsuperscript{32}Fernández Poncela 1997, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{33}See e.g. Franco 1998, p. 12; Kampwirth 1996, p. 72; Molyneux 1988; Randall 1992; Ríos Rocha & Tenorio 1997, p. 139.
of the FSLN to respond adequately to such issues as e.g. women and environmental questions, caused frustration that led to the outburst of independent NGOs in the beginning of 1990s. Thus, the Sandinista era both strengthened democratic aspects in Nicaraguan society and failed to give space to a living, critical civil society.\textsuperscript{34}

During the present government, Nicaraguan NGOs have had to face attempts to control their international relations and donations from outside as well as a high degree of negligence from the part of the government to discuss with them. One of the examples of this dynamic has been the preparation and follow-up process of the Cairo and Beijing conferences.\textsuperscript{35}

The role of the Catholic Church has become much more influential in government policies during the 1990s. This is especially true in issues such as education, family and reproductive rights. Almost without exception, NGOs working with reproductive and women's issues state that the government is extremely influenced by the most conservative sectors - such as Opus Dei -of the Catholic Church. The creation of the new Ministry of the Family in 1998 is a sign of attempts of centralization and the kind of church-state dynamic in which some aspects of governmental policies are delegated to sectors and persons representing the most traditional thinking in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church. Issues related to marriage, divorce, family planning and abortion are to a great extent determined by religious influence. There are national laws that discriminate against women. In the name of religious precepts, laws have been passed or not, condemned or approved, according to certain religious principles.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34}See e.g. Fernández Poncela 1997; Franco 1998; González 1997.

\textsuperscript{35}See e.g. Renzi et al. 1997; Rodríguez (coord.) 1997.

\textsuperscript{36}Blumenthal 1995, p. 9; Siu 1992, p. 16.
The Ministry of Education has taken a conservative approach to sexual education at schools, an attitude that is in clear contradiction with the government's official national policy on population matters. Instead of “true and complete information on the existing family planning methods”, promised in the national population programme, the MED is promoting a program called "Integral sexual education" (educación sexual integral), which in practice promotes abstinence as the best contraceptive method for young, unmarried persons. Sexuality is seen in two terms: first, the "uniting" meaning of sexuality serves as a strengthening factor for the married couple, and, second, the "procreative" meaning aims at procreation.

Not only NGOs, but other governmental sectors as well, express the difficulty of implementing a coherent government policy in reproductive issues, as long as some ministries are representing and promoting the official Vatican view, which in turn, as is well-known, has been highly critical of the Cairo and Beijing programmes for action. The Nicaraguan government - including the extremely conservative Ministry of Education - is committed to these international agreements.

In the Beijing +5 follow-up conference in June 2000 in New York, Nicaragua was frequently mentioned as the most critical Latin American country towards the Platform of Action. As such, the country also was an exception among most Third World countries, including Latin American countries: it was accompanied by the Vatican, Pakistan, Iran, Libya, Algeria and the Sudan. Some of the voices of the ”South” were thus represented by the most conservative religious sectors of these societies.

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37 Política nacional de población 1998, pp. 18, 34.


39 The Beijing +5 documents can be reached at the web pages of the United Nations at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/followup/beijing5/about.html
In the opinions of the NGOs of the health sector, there is no coherent government policy in Nicaragua in issues of sexual education and reproductive rights. The NGOs have lobbied for the government to commit itself in concrete terms to the Cairo and Beijing programmes for action. One of the demands has been that the imposition of religious issues on the formulation of public policies, especially in health and education programmes, should be avoided. The Catholic Church, and especially the present Archbishop of Nicaragua, Monseñor Miguel Obando y Bravo, are seen as a powerful political actor in the society. Both the government and the opposition, including the Sandinistas, seek the support of the Church for their own political ends. This is judged as highly problematic by the NGOs, both secular and religious, because what it means in practice is that no political party will risk the high political cost of becoming the enemy of the Church. This is exactly what happened already in the 1980s when the Sandinistas were in power. In all Latin America, those governments that have opted for a national family planning programme, have had to encounter the opposition of the Church. Those who have not, have been able to keep the Church as their best ally.

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40Not only NGOs but researchers share this opinion as well. According to Berglund et al., "There are also other determinants to consider that interact with class, culture and religion in Nicaragua. One is the lack of political ability to recognize the close association between women's health and information and services concerning sexuality, reproduction and contraception. There exists in practice no overall coherent national policy that favors applied effective family planning and women's health. This expresses itself through the lack of sexual education in schools." Berglund et al. 1997, p. 11 (emphasis added).

41For example, the Nicaraguan Nacional Committee for the Beijing Conference, states that "in Nicaragua, we women have succeeded in making the government to take seriously many of our ideas before the Copenhagen and Beijing conferences, but it makes serious reservations in relation to our reproductive and sexual rights." See Las cumbres mundiales y nosotras 1995, p. 20 (emphasis in original). In spite of the effective organization of the civil society for the Cairo and Beijing conferences, it is largely felt, in the words of Ana María Pizarro, that "these proposals were never incorporated in the documents which the Nicaraguan government took to Cairo." Pizarro 1997, p. 11. See also Rodríguez (coord.) 1997 and Renzi et al. 1997.

42Pizarro 1997, p. 11.

43Written testimony on this, see Pizarro 1997, p. 6. Also, according to Jean Franco, "Latin American governments are caught in a bind between [this] imperative to "modernize" and opposition to birth control and abortion coming from the Church and other conservative groups." Franco 1996, p. 9.

Much of what was stated in this article on religion and reproductive rights in Latin America in general can be applied to the specific case of Nicaragua. According to Staffan Berglund, in the context of adolescent pregnancies in Nicaragua,

"it is easy to understand how material dependency, the craving for emotional affection and lack of alternative opportunities [...] in combination with religious rejection of contraception and culturally sanctioned female subordination to machismo values leave very few options for the poor woman than the physical and material protection of a man as a last resort."\(^{45}\)

Who represents Nicaraguan women?

In this short last part of my paper, I propose some tentative ideas of how much of social scientific research has perceived and represented Nicaraguan women. I am not able to go into this discussion at length in this paper.

One could say that there are at least three general frameworks in which Nicaraguan women have been categorized both by Nicaraguan scholars and activists and foreigners\(^{46}\), each framework employing key images for representing Nicaraguan women. First, there is the ”Third World women” or ”poor women” category which tends to see and analyze women’s everyday life and experiences mainly through the lenses of economic hardships, which is of course understandable in a country like Nicaragua. There has been a lot of critique by ”Third World feminists” of this image

\(^{45}\)Berglund et al. 1997, p. 11.

\(^{46}\) In this categorization, I owe my inspiration to my Finnish colleague Tuula Sakaranaho who analyzes Turkish women in three different categories: the Kemalists, the feminists, and the Islamists. Although different from Nicaragua, I was struck by the similar discourses ("rhetorics") between the two countries. See Sakaranaho 1998.
of women from poor countries in much of Western (feminist) social sciences, because it too easily presents Thrid World women as a homogeneous entity and passive victims without agancy.\footnote{Mohanty’s well-known article “Under Western Eyes” is one of the first attempts of this. See Mohanty 1991.}

Second, inside Nicaragua more than elsewhere, we have the legacy of the Sandinista or pro-Sandinista rhetoric on women, which reached its peak in the tumultuous years of the 80s. This way of presenting Nicaraguan women is maybe best captured in a well-known photograph (which later on was printed as a poster and painted on the wall of the *Madres de los Héroes y Mártires* office in Managua, nowadays nonexistent), which depicts a beautiful and happy young woman with a small baby in her arms and a rifle on her back. This image captures well also most of the AMNLAE politics of the 1980s: the heroic savior-like figure of a woman who both reproduces and enjoys reproducing her people and is both willing and able also to defend her country with a gun. What this sort of image does not depict is the immense contradiction and suffering this very combination has produced for Nicaraguan women, which also apparently was one of the reasons for women voting against the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections. The image also lets us understand that both the baby and the rifle are attached to her by her voluntary choice, which we know, more often than not is not true.

Of course I am not saying that there would not be situations where women do make the voluntary choice of taking up arms even when they are mothers. My critique is directed to the use of this kind of imagery both as an ideal and as part of a revolutionary discourse which, at the same time, does not take seriously women’s demands from within the revolutionaries’ own ranks.

As was already said, this rhetoric was hostile to women’s feminist and more autonomous (of the FSLN and the Sandinista state apparatus) organizing and political activism. The Nicaraguan
feminist activist, poor or middle-class, is not among the most favorite images of Nicaraguan women. These women suffered most of the contradiction between their great support for the Sandinistas both before and during the revolution and the obvious omission of their feminist critique from FSLN rhetoric and practice.

And **third**, we have the image of especially much of feminist research on Nicaraguan women as being oppressed by religion and *machismo*, or the deadly combination of the two. This I already discussed in the beginning of the paper. My major critique to this sort of presentation is **not** that the combination would be flawed but that is too one-sided and simple and does leave out much of women´s own agency concerning both religion and *machismo*.

Where in these three frameworks do we here the most authentic voice of Nicaraguan women? Is there such a thing as an authentic voice? Who has the right, so to say, to represent Nicaraguan women? My answer at this point is that it is important to take into account all the different kinds of discourses on women, partly produced by women themselves, feminist or not. There is no one correct discourse or image. It is sometimes more important to look at what is being left out than what is being said or depicted. My argument in this paper has been that one such serious omission is the multi-faceted and complicated role of religion in women´s lives, in the case of Nicaragua especially that of Catholicism.

**Conclusion: religion and power**
The role of religion is extremely complicated and cannot be analyzed in depth in this paper. However, I would like to raise two issues. **First**, it is important to understand the direct intervention and lobbying of the Catholic Church in legislation and policies around reproductive issues in the Latin American countries. With a government as the present one in Nicaragua, the state apparatus actually offers - albeit not without contradictions - an open space for this intervention. **Second**, a more subtle effect of religion lays in its power to create and justify gender stereotypes that reinforce women's subordination. It is not overestimated to say that in spite of the levels of secularization the image of woman (and man) in Latin American societies is largely based on traditional Catholic thought and teaching.

If the Vatican roulette on women’s lives is taken as seriously as I think it should, a feminist analysis and action should pay special attention to the importance of religion in people’s lives. This importance is not black-and-white, nor are the inherited religious traditions as unanimously oppressive than we may think. A strong feminist claim from within the religious institutions in fact says that the conservative interpretation is just one interpretation of many, and that issues of interpretation are always about power. The importance of the feminist critique of religion is in its affirmation of the meaning of religion(s) in people’s lives in both good and bad. This critique should be taken much more seriously in feminist studies and in Latin American studies than it has usually been done.


