

Sonja K. Foss

FEMINISM CONFRONT CATHOLICISM: A STUDY OF THE USE OF  
PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY

One of Burke's central notions of criticism involves the examination of strategies used in communication for dealing with various situations. When situations are typical and recurrent, people develop names for and strategies of handling them. But when people confront new situations, or what they perceive to be inaccurate views of situations, often there are no names for these situations and thus no traditional ways of dealing with them. In such instances, a new vocabulary arises to name the situation, enabling a person to gain the control over it that the assignment of a name brings.<sup>1</sup>

Perspective by incongruity<sup>2</sup> is one strategy by which people interpret and name new or troubling situations. This technique involves merging categories once believed to be mutually exclusive or wrenching a word loose from one category and applying it to a different category. "Arabian Puritanism" is an example of perspective by incongruity since it combines two words or ideas that usually are not associated with one another. Perspective by incongruity, then, is a strategy that can be used to name accurately a situation that is perceived as inaccurate. It functions to introduce change into the environment and to enable the communicator to control the situation which he or she faces.

The rhetorical critic seeking to understand the strategies that communicators use when they are faced with the problem of resolving two very different perspectives on a particular issue may find part of the answer in the study of perspective by incongruity. The controversy between feminism and Catholicism represents a situation in which communicators must overcome prevailing attitudes that oppose their own perceptions of a situation if they are to be persuasive. Particularly in their views of and treatment of women, these two ideologies differ greatly. If perspective by incongruity is indeed a strategy that communicators use in these kinds of situations, its use likely will appear in feminist rhetoric against the Catholic Church.

This study represents an examination and evaluation of the use of perspective by incongruity in two pieces of feminist rhetoric against the policies of the Church regarding women: (1) a speech presented by Ti-Grace Atkinson at Catholic University in Washington, D. C. on March 10, 1973 and (2) an essay by Mary Daly entitled, "Women and the Catholic Church."<sup>4</sup>

I

Ti-Grace Atkinson was a founding member of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and served on the national board of directors of the organization until her resignation in October, 1966. She resigned because she objected to the hierarchical structure of NOW and wanted it replaced with a system in which officers were rotated monthly. She and other dissatisfied NOW members formed a radical feminist group, The Feminists, based in New York City. She resigned from this group in 1970 following a dispute with other members

about her portrayal as the group's leader by the media. She since has formed another feminist group, Autonomous Women.<sup>5</sup>

Atkinson's speech at Catholic University was billed as an expose' of the Catholic Church's treatment of and attitudes toward women. Atkinson had been banned from speaking at the University by its president, Clarence C. Walton, whose decision initiated a controversy over the issue of free speech and the school's right to rule on what campus speakers say about Church doctrine. The undergraduate and graduate student governments at Catholic University took the issue to court, and U. S. District Court Judge John Lewis Smith, Jr. ruled that Atkinson constitutionally was guaranteed access to the speaking platform at the University.

Two events combined to create an explosive speaking situation for Atkinson: her reputation as a radical feminist and the fact that her audience was familiar with statements she had made earlier at Notre Dame University questioning the virginity of Jesus' mother, Mary. Approximately 1500 people attended benediction at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception to protest Atkinson's speech, and leaflets denouncing her appeared all over the campus. Hostility toward Atkinson particularly was intense during the speech itself. Patricia Buckley Bozell (sister of columnist William Buckley and former New York senator James Buckley and wife of Brent Bozell, editor of the Catholic magazine, *Triumph*) ran through the audience to the podium and tried to slap Atkinson in the middle of her speech. She hit the microphone instead and then ran outside the auditorium, where she knelt on the sidewalk and said a rosary.<sup>6</sup>

An examination of the text of Atkinson's speech reveals that perspective by incongruity is her main strategy for meeting the rhetorical situation with which she was faced. In order for audience members to accept her argumentation, they first had to reach the point of questioning the purposes and actions of the Church. Atkinson accomplishes this through the use of strong imagery involving perspective by incongruity. One of the first examples of her use of this technique comes when she compares the Church to the Ku Klux Klan. She juxtaposes these two institutions through links of similar ideologies and costumes: "The Church (hierarchy) is a sort of Ku Klux Klan. Unfortunately, up until tonight, the Church has not been exposed sufficiently to hide its face. And those costumes they wear can hardly be compared monetarily to sheets."<sup>7</sup> Here Atkinson forces her audience to consider the Church in the negative vein in which many people view the Ku Klux Klan and hints at possible reasons for secrecy in the Church.

Perspective by incongruity is evident again when Atkinson refers to the Catholic articles of faith as "Catholic hallucinations."<sup>8</sup> She returns to this image later in the speech when she discusses the oppressive treatment of women by the Church and women's efforts to gain relief from it: "But the cathedrals are inhabited, in addition, by the living dead--the women who pray for relief, whether death or the living death of fantasy. Hallucinations come easily and are welcomed under such conditions."<sup>9</sup> These instances in which hallucinations are paired with articles of faith combine the notion of a mentally disordered perception with the notion of divine, reasonable, and infallible Church doctrine. The intent is to make the audience question the reality and validity of the articles of faith, part of the Church ideology that Atkinson believes oppresses women.

Atkinson uses perspective by incongruity in a discussion of the Catholic Church as a corporation. Although most of the audience undoubtedly realizes that the Church is a business, its commercial aspect is not regarded as its main function. But Atkinson focuses on the Church as a business by juxtaposing the terminology of business and the audience view of the Church as a nonprofit, humanitarian institution: "The Catholic Church is the biggest corporation in the United States. It has a branch in almost every neighborhood. The assets and real estate holdings exceed those of Standard Oil, A. T. & T., and U. S. Steel combined. And the roster of dues-paying members is second only to the rolls of the United States Government."<sup>10</sup>

Next, Atkinson attempts to destroy the image of the Church as a good, just and charitable institution by labeling it a vulture: "The Church is a kind of vulture on the poor. The Church picks the bones of the poor and is eagerly permitted to do so by them, in exchange for the promise of revenge in the world to come."<sup>11</sup> She carries the image further through the use of devil terms, attempting to destroy the connotations of the Church as good: "It is for this, the savage and hypocritical abuse and manipulation of humanity, that the Church and institutional religion are hated and despised by free peoples."<sup>12</sup> Here she has done more than describe the Church as an evil element. She has introduced the notion that people cannot be associated with the Church and remain true to the ideals of freedom and justice at the same time. Thus, she has defined the Church as evil and placed it in a separate category from freedom, implying that the two cannot be reconciled.

The evil nature of the Church is reinforced in Atkinson's portrayal of it as a murderer and robber. She pleads for the cause of "women, whom the Church for two thousand years has slaughtered, and robbed, who were born and died deprived of their humanity, who died in agony without even the right to cry out against their pain, because their agony was at the same time their shame."<sup>13</sup>

At the conclusion of her speech, Atkinson repeatedly uses perspective by incongruity as she charges the Church with various crimes. In these instances, she is associating a supposedly pure Church with the criminal actions of murder, slavery, prostitution, rape, and obscenity:

I, Ti-Grace Atkinson, in the name of all women, most especially the deceased victims of the accused, charge the Catholic Church, its government, and all its subsidiaries and members such as Catholic University with murder in the first degree, premeditated and wilful. . . . In the name of all women, I charge the Catholic Church with conspiracy to imprison and enslave the women of the world, through coercion into such institutions as marriage and the family.

In the name of all women, I charge the Catholic Church with forcing many of our class into prostitution, through the financial greed of the Church.

In the name of all women, I charge the Catholic Church with inciting rape against women, by its degrading and sadistic propaganda against women.

In the name of all women, I charge the Catholic Church with constituting, by its very existence, an obscenity on the face of the earth.<sup>14</sup> She then pronounces the Catholic Church guilty on all counts,<sup>15</sup> reinforcing the incongruous images of the Church as both just and criminal. Throughout her speech, then, Atkinson combines strong, shocking images to force the audience to question beliefs about the feelings toward the Church.

## II

Mary Daly is a professor of theology at Boston College and the author of The Church and the Second Sex (New York: Harper Colophon, 1968) and Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon, 1973), in addition to several essays. Her essay in Sisterhood is Powerful dealing with feminism and the Catholic Church represents a more moderate stance than that which Atkinson assumes in her speech. She discusses contradictions between feminist and Catholic ideologies and suggests ways in which the Church can alter its policies so that they will accord with a feminist view of women. Daly's more moderate approach undoubtedly stems from her Catholic background, and this ethical factor alone lends credence to Daly that Atkinson never can have for a Catholic audience. Because of this added credibility and because she is able to envision a reconciliation of feminism and Catholicism, Daly uses perspective by incongruity less and with weaker, less shocking images than does Atkinson.

Daly's first use of perspective by incongruity is her juxtaposition of the Church and injustice. While the Church usually is regarded as just and fair, Daly labels it as unjust: "The existence of the problem of antifeminism in the Church, then, is coming to be recognized: pious euphemisms are losing their potency to disguise the reality of injustice."<sup>16</sup> She hopes that her readers will begin to realize that the Church is not always as fair as they may have believed.

Perspective by incongruity appears again when Daly discusses Mary, the mother of Jesus, who stands as the eternal feminine symbol of Catholicism. Daly attempts to destroy the image of Mary as the ideal in womanhood by viewing her as less than human:

The "eternal feminine" symbol, which continues to recur in religious writings, stands in stark opposition to the qualities of a developing, authentic person who will be unique, self-critical, self-creating, active, and searching. In contrast to these authentic personal characteristics, the Eternal Woman is said to have a vocation for surrender and secrecy; hence the symbol of the veil. Self-less, she achieves not individual realization but merely generic fulfillment in motherhood, physical or spiritual. She is said to be timeless and conservative by nature. She is shrouded in "mystery," because she is not recognized as a genuine human person.<sup>17</sup>

Daly's terms become stronger when she applies the notion of lack of humanness to all women in the Catholic Church, actually declaring that they are subhuman: "More important perhaps, the majority of women have never protested their relegation, in theory and in social fact, to subhuman categories."<sup>18</sup>

Daly combines two images of perspective by incongruity when, in discussing a belief in divine approval for the man-woman relationships perpetuated by the Church, she states: "Catholics have been very susceptible to this kind of mystification, particularly because of indoctrination in an underdeveloped theology, and because of static and traditionalist notions of faith and revelation."<sup>19</sup> Here she has introduced the notion of indoctrination, which carries connotations of brainwashing and a lack of free choice. This she equates with the Church's teaching of its doctrine, which it undoubtedly prefers to call instruction. By focusing on the process as indoctrination, Daly hopes to point out the absurdity of espousing a traditional belief without questioning it. The perspective by incongruity in the phrase, "underdeveloped theology," combines Catholic theology with the notion that it is unsophisticated, naive, and primitive. The theology of the Catholic Church, because of its long history of development and stability over time, usually is not considered to be underdeveloped. Daly employs this word to modify the word "theology," however, to state what she considers to be an accurate assessment--that the theology of the Church in regard to women is indeed underdeveloped.

Later in the article, Daly uses perspective by incongruity as a strategy to reverse the argument of the Church that feminism is harmful to both women and the Church. Daly's technique is to argue that the Church, by not adopting feminist principles, is harming itself. She does this by juxtaposing the Church and words such as "wounded," "deprived," and "grievously hurt," implying that rather than working to sustain and generate faith--its generally perceived function--the Church is destroying itself: "By sexual discrimination the Church has been wounded in its structures, for its has deprived itself of the gifts and insights of more than half its members. It has been grievously hurt in its members of both sexes, for in a society which welcomes and fosters prejudice, not group is the human potential of the subject group restricted but the superordinate group also becomes warped in the process."<sup>20</sup>

Daly concludes, as does Atkinson, with a final example of perspective by incongruity. Again, like Atkinson, she labels the Church evil rather than good: "There is a demonic aspect to the Church's structures, but there are also signs of hope that its negative, life-destroying elements can be transformed."<sup>21</sup> The posting of the devil or a demon within the Church is a strong restructuring of the usual perception of the Church as representing God and good and working against the forces of evil. And, while the Church represents positive, life-creating forces, she creates a new view of the situation by labeling it as negative and life-destroying. For Daly, then, perspective by incongruity is an important technique with which to point out aspects of the Church that are unjust and that should be corrected.

## III

An examination of the uses of perspective by incongruity in two pieces of rhetoric by feminists attempting to deal with and argue against the Catholic Church's treatment of women illustrates that this technique is common in rhetorical situations where a communicator attempts to supplant a traditional view of a situation with a new and restructured one. One way to deal with the problem is to juxtapose a new or opposite perception with a favored, traditional one, making the old view appear less desirable to the audience.

Although demonstrated here in discourse by contemporary feminists, the technique of perspective by incongruity is not unique to their discourse. The technique has been used by feminists and others throughout history to argue against religious teachings and institutions. Commentaries in Elizabeth Gady Stanton's The Woman's Bible, for example, include the use of perspective by incongruity. In one instance, Stanton uses the technique to portray the serpent in the Garden of Eden as a Socratic or Platonic figure in order to dispel blame for the fall of Adam and Eve from the woman: "Like Socrates or Plato, his powers of conversation and asking puzzling questions, were no doubt marvelous, and he roused in the woman that intense thirst for knowledge, that the simple pleasures of picking flowers and talking with Adam did not satisfy."<sup>22</sup> Few people could resist being enraptured by the thought and discourse of either Socrates or Plato; because the snake possessed similar qualities, Eve cannot be blamed for having been swayed by its arguments.

Other feminists have argued similarly. Women's suffrage leader Matilda Joselyn Gage juxtaposes the Church and the crime of robbery in her work, Woman, Church, and State: "The most stupendous system of organized robbery known has been that of the church towards women, a robbery that has not only taken her self-respect but all rights of person; the fruits of her own industry; her opportunities of education; the exercise of her own judgment, her own conscience, her own will."<sup>23</sup> Like Atkinson, Gage destroys the usual view of the Church as a charitable institution; it becomes instead a criminal seeking to steal rather than to give.

Prostitution is connected with the Church in anarchist Emma Goldman's essay on the traffic in women. Again, the Church is charged with fostering a criminal activity: ". . . since it is known to every intelligent student that prostitution is of religious origin, maintained and fostered for many centuries, not as a shame, but as a virtue, hailed as such by the Gods themselves."<sup>24</sup> Prostitution, which is viewed by most churches as an immoral activity, becomes in this case sanctioned by the Church. The equation of these two images is intended to lead readers to a re-thinking of the Church's ideology and practices.

Arguments against the Church in general throughout history also have included the use of perspective by incongruity. Voltaire, for example, questions the authenticity of Jesus as the special child of God by equating Jesus' fame with an image campaign, rather than assuming, as many religious teachings do, that his fame was due to divine status: "In a word, there is no kind of trickery, fraud, and imposture that the Nazareans do not adopt. At the end of three years they succeeded in having Jesus recognised as a god."<sup>25</sup>

The value of the Bible is attacked by Joseph Lewis, an atheist who served as president of the Freethinkers of America and who initiated various legal proceedings against the incorporation of religion in public schools. He equates the Bible with obscenity: "It is a collection of obscene stories gathered together solely for the purpose of expressing the lasciviousness of human nature, and that is why they are put in the Bible. It reflects the sexual depravity of its authors."<sup>26</sup> Here, Lewis' use of perspective by incongruity causes a questioning of the traditional view that the Bible is the word of God; it becomes instead the writing of pornographers.

Similar arguments are presented by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who initiated the suit resulting in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to ban Bible reading and prayer recitation from public schools. She refers to the ideology and tenets of religion as

"old garbage of rules"<sup>27</sup> and "fairy tales,"<sup>28</sup> a juxtaposition of the notions of divine doctrine with trash and fantasy. She offers an attack on the Bible similar to that of Lewis, associating the Bible with negative qualities and evil lessons: "It is poor literature, poor history and poor ethics and all in all it has nothing to recommend it."<sup>29</sup> She continues by pointing out that "going clear through the Old Testament one finds nothing but hatred, vengeance, cruelty, oppression, lust, deprivation. It is a perfectly horrible book."<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the frequency of the use of perspective by incongruity to argue against accepted perceptions best can be understood by an examination of the way in which rhetoric functions to create reality. Many theorists have argued that the beliefs and values--or the view of reality--held by an individual is formed to a large degree by symbols such as language. Cassirer, for example, suggests that language creates its own reality because it organizes the sensory world of perceptions. He explains this process: "From this point of view, myth, art, language, and science appear as symbols; not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own. . . . Thus the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us."<sup>31</sup>

The notion that rhetoric creates reality is evidenced in the formation of the attitudes, beliefs, values, and in fact, the entire world or reality of religious believers. The ceremonies and rituals and the tenets repeated and reinforced are rhetorical forms that operate to create a particular reality for the participants. Whether this reality conforms to the actual world is irrelevant; what is important is that religious rhetoric has created a special reality that is true and real for the participants.

Perspective by incongruity attempts to shatter the world created by traditional rhetoric that fosters long-accepted religious teachings. The rhetor arguing against tradition who employs this technique begins inside the traditional world or reality with an image that conforms to that reality. But then a jarring, opposing image is introduced that forces the auditor or reader to re-think and question--at least momentarily--the components of his or her world. The more radical the juxtaposition of images, the more threatening to the reality the rhetoric will be; at the same time, the greater potential for failure the technique will have. For if a juxtaposition is too radical, audience members will feel so threatened that they simply will retreat into their own special reality and refuse to consider the arguments of the rhetor. Communicators who use perspective by incongruity, then, must employ it cautiously. They must introduce a notion that is jarring enough to initiate the process of re-thinking, but at the same time, they must not present an image that is so strong that it immediately alienates the audience.

Thus, while both Atkinson and Daly may cause their audiences to reconsider their views toward Catholicism and its treatment of women through perspective by incongruity, Daly's rhetoric probably would be more effective with a Catholic audience because her images are less strong, less radical, and easier to accept. Atkinson's use of perspective by incongruity would be cheered by an audience already hostile to the Catholic Church and favorable to feminism, but it probably would anger and alienate many members of a Catholic audience simply because the juxtaposition of conflicting categories is too extreme. Nevertheless, perspective by incongruity appears to be a useful technique for communicators seeking to sup-

plant an old reality with a new one, providing it is used to increase the awareness of the audience members and is supplemented by other rhetorical strategies such as evidence to substantiate the claims being made in the juxtaposition of mutually-exclusive notions.

Notes

- 1<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 966.
- 2<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Burke, Permanence & Change (Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes, 1954), p. 89.
- 3<sup>3</sup>1-Grace Atkinson, Amazon Odyssey (New York: Links Books, 1974), pp. 191-97.
- 4<sup>4</sup>Mary Daly, "Women and the Catholic Church," in Sisterhood Is Powerful, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 124-38.
- 5<sup>5</sup>Carol Kleinman, "Women's Movement Just Sputtering Along?" Chicago Tribune, 20 November 1974, sec. 3, p. 2.
- 6<sup>6</sup>Judith Martin, "An Attack on TI-Grace," Washington Post, 11 March 1971, sec. 8, pp. 1-2.
- 7<sup>7</sup>Atkinson, p. 191.
- 8<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 192.
- 9<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 194.
- 10<sup>10</sup>Ibid.
- 11<sup>11</sup>Ibid.
- 12<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 194-95.
- 13<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 196.
- 14<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 196-97.
- 15<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 197.
- 16<sup>16</sup>Daly, p. 126.
- 17<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 127.
- 18<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 128.
- 19<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 129.
- 20<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

21<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

22<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Woman's Bible: Parts I and II (1895; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 25.

23<sup>3</sup>Matilda Joslyn Gage, Women, Church and State (New York: Truth Seeker, 1893), p. 527.

24<sup>4</sup>Emma Goldman, The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism (1917; rpt. New York: Times Change Press, 1970), p. 22.

25<sup>5</sup>Voltaire, Toleration and Other Essays, trans. Joseph McCabe (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1912), p. 178.

26<sup>6</sup>Joseph Lewis, "Mike Wallace Interviews Joseph Lewis on TV," An Atheist Manifesto (New York: Freethought Press, 1954), n.p.

27<sup>7</sup>Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Why I Am an Atheist (Austin, Texas: Society of Separationists, 1976), p. 2.

28<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

29<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.

30<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

31<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Ernest C. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (December 1972), 396-407 and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966).

32<sup>12</sup>Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Harper, 1946), p. 8.