

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### The priest, the body, the bride and the whore towards a theology of women's priesthood

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**THE PRIEST, THE BODY, THE BRIDE  
AND THE WHORE:  
TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF WOMEN'S PRIESTHOOD**

**by**

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requirements for the degree of PhD**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A theology of women's priesthood can be developed through an examination of the symbol and narrative of Christian religion.

Metaphors of the body, the bride and the whore form a leitmotif through Christian scripture and tradition, and these have traditionally been interpreted from a phallogocentric viewpoint. A feminist approach to scripture and tradition reveals that the woman priest causes a shift in the interpretation of these metaphors that impacts on many areas of Christian worship and life. The Eucharist, the central Anglican rite and nexus between the narrative of faith and the praxis of discipleship, is laden with symbols that, if effective, are also transformative for the worshipper. The priest, instrumental in the liturgy, has a key symbolic function in offering such potential for the Church community.

When celebrating the Eucharist, the priest who is a woman recovers ignored or undervalued meanings within the associated symbolism which give rise to new possibilities theologically, liturgically and morally for Christian teaching and discipleship. The multivalent symbolism of priesthood thus acquires a new breadth and richness that addresses our understanding of the nature of the triune God, and of ourselves as beings created in the image of God and members of the Body of Christ. The woman priest causes a 'collision' with the received wisdom of traditional teaching and practice, and invites consideration of the genderisation of symbol and narrative, the exclusion of women from sacred rituals and spaces, and the lack of a female religious imaginary.

A feminist reading of Paul Ricoeur, together with an engagement with Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen, demonstrates that philosophical and psychoanalytical inquiry offers transformative possibilities for the religious imaginary, for the recognition of sexual difference and for the possibility of woman as subject of culture. The woman priest, representative both of the divine and of humankind, has a key role in this process.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the narrative of the Christian tradition, the figure of the priest comes freighted with a great range of nuanced symbolic meanings. Among other symbols associated with priesthood are those of the body, the bride and the whore; and these are all especially resonant now that priests in the Anglican Church include women. My aim in this study is to begin to develop a theology of women's priesthood through an examination of the symbol and narrative of Christian religion, including the metaphors of the body, the bride and the whore which each form a leitmotif through scripture and tradition.

God-talk these days, it seems, is littered with bodies. In contrast to an historical ambivalence towards the body, current Christian theology, concerned as it is with themes of identity and relationship, characteristically starts from the perspective of the embodied nature of people as members of the Body of Christ.<sup>1</sup> It considers individual and communal experience of the numinous: the immanence, the now-ness of God embodied in the universe, in humanity and in the community of faith.<sup>2</sup> This notion of embodiment is expressed in the Eucharist, the central act of Anglican worship, in which, through the action of the Holy Spirit, Christ is made present to worshippers, and through which the life and identity of the Church is affirmed and renewed. From the confessional standpoint of the Anglican Church, which I adopt here, the Eucharist is central to God's continuing self-revelation. As a sacramental re-enactment of an historical event, a ceremonial banquet and a sacrifice shared by the whole community, it forms the nexus between the narrative of faith and the praxis of discipleship.

Perhaps more than any other form of Christian worship, the Eucharist affirms God's presence in and through the material fabric of human existence. The liturgy makes use of natural symbols, rooted in daily life, to draw theological meaning that expands experience and understanding of the numinous, pointing to a mystagogical disclosure of the divine that forms and moulds discipleship and ministry. It takes the ordinary into the extraordinary as the transcendent is celebrated within the immanent. Through the Eucharist, described by Louis Bouyer as a 'spiritual burst of energy', (Bouyer 1968:14) worshippers continuously re-interpret the example and work of Jesus Christ in renewing and developing a relationship with God and with the world, and in so doing order and interpret ultimate realities that cannot be expressed through intellectual effort alone. Without a sense of the meaning of the Eucharist, as Bouyer argues, 'the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Carrette and Richard King call this trend 'a new religious politics of the flesh'. (Carrette & King 1998:124)

<sup>2</sup> Interest in the body is not confined to theology. Susan Ross comments that, during the last twenty years, some of the most interesting and important work, not only in theology, but also in history and philosophy, has been concerned with the role of the body. (Ross 1998:97) For a discussion on the importance of the body in feminist thought, particularly in relation to Simone Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray's work on immanence and transcendence, see Hollywood, Amy M., 'Beauvoieur, Irigaray and the Mystical', Fall 1994 in *Hypatia* vol. 9 no:4. Carrette and King note that although the 'body' is currently in vogue, it is still 'barely recognisable, a phantom' since 'a language of the body is only just being formulated'. (1998:124)

Church herself could not become a reality in us and through us'. (Bouyer 1968:14)

The eucharistic ritual is pregnant with transformative possibilities, its rich symbolism inviting a response from all who take part. The priest, instrumental in the receptiveness of the worship to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, performs certain actions described by RT Beckwith as 'reserved to those who have been specifically ordained, as ministers of the word and sacraments, to perform them.' (Beckwith 1964:20) The distinct role of the priest is to symbolise the priestly identity of Christ and the priestliness of the Church. The priest, moreover, represents God and Christ to the Church and to the whole community, and represents them before God and Christ. (Sotirios 2003:30) In line with its tendency to favour concept above symbol, the Reformed Church sought the purging of any sacerdotal implications in the priest's actions; yet the Church of England has always held to the very ancient and widespread custom that only bishops and presbyters administer the Holy Communion. (Beckwith 1964:24) Within the Reformed tradition today there are shades of opinion as to the nature and function of the priesthood with regard to the Eucharist. I adhere to the Anglican custom that Holy Communion is administered only by the ordained priest.

Within the eucharistic liturgy, the Eucharistic Prayer, spoken by the priest alone, is a prayer of blessing and memorial which retells the narrative of the Last Supper, referring back to Christ's words and actions. It also represents, as David Power puts it, 'the transformation of humanity and of human nature in the flesh of Christ, the re-creation of the human race.' (Power 1992:104) The priest expresses through words and actions 'how Christ and church are together united as the new creation.' (1992:105) The priest, then, has a key symbolic function, becoming part of the language of symbolic communication, articulating in word and action the relationship between society and its sacred things. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the function of validly representing both humanity and God is assisted and expressed in bodily materiality, movements and gestures. What is done in liturgy points to the priest's necessary separateness as a living symbol whose cultic actions are drawn from common life but point beyond it.

The priest, as celebrant, shares and reflects the faith of the community present, and also of the Church world-wide and the Church throughout history. In taking bread, breaking and consecrating it, the priest acts in the name of Christ, of the local congregation and of the Catholic Church down through history. And here, in the Anglican Church in England and Wales, there has been a recent and significant change: in the last few years, celebrants at the altar have included priests who are women.<sup>3</sup> For the first time in the history of the Anglican Church, all members of a congregation have had the opportunity to receive the sacraments both from someone of their own sex and from a member of the opposite sex.

Since the priest's role is central in the eucharistic invitation to respond to the animation of the Holy Spirit, the question arises as to whether the priest who is a

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<sup>3</sup> This innovation took place in England in 1994 and in Wales in 1997.



woman brings changes or new meanings theologically, liturgically and morally to Christian teaching and life. Thomas Hopko, an Orthodox Christian, sees this question as particularly relevant for ‘churches which mystically and symbolically identify these ordained ministries with the sacramental presence of the Lord in the church community.’ (Hopko 1999:249) However, it also applies, he argues, to churches of Reformed traditions which ‘for biblical reason still ha[ve] only certain qualified men serving in ... ministerial positions’. (1999:251) In both these instances, the argument against women priests rests on an understanding of the symbolic nature of priesthood. In the first case, the argument is based on the meaning of the priest being *in persona Christi*<sup>4</sup>: since Christ’s incarnation was as a man, then only a man can adequately incarnate Christ for the priesthood of the Church. (Fink 1983:466) In the second case, the biblical argument used against women priests rests on the notion of Christ’s headship over the Church, which has traditionally been taken to model the relationship between husband and wife, and more broadly between men and women. Paul’s constraints on women as leaders were taken as a prescription for all time, based on an interpretation of Christ’s headship of the Church as prescriptive for the relationship between husband and wife.<sup>5</sup>

Hopko, declaring himself to regret the ordination of women priests, notes the changes that have already occurred in churches with women priests, including the language, style, manner and intention of liturgical worship’. (Hopko 1999:250) He links such revisioning to changes also in

attitudes and disciplines in regard to marriage, family and sexual activity, and with qualifications for ordination and expectations of the clergy in their professional services and their personal behaviour. (1999:250)

He wonders what will happen to churches that allow the ordination of

women, together with the physically challenged people, the more than once married, the sexually active unmarried, those married to persons who are not members of their churches, those convicted of public crimes, and others who traditionally would have been disqualified from pastoral service in their churches. (1999:250)

Hopko does not clarify why women should be linked with the other groups he names, nor why such groups should indeed be barred from ordained ministry. Nevertheless, I would agree with him that, once the multivalent symbolism of priesthood is broken open by the advent of women priests, then the way is open for the symbol of priesthood to be borne by others previously ignored or banned by, for instance, physical disability or marital status. This in turn calls for another look at the nature of what is signified – the divine and ourselves in relation to God and to each other.

The long road towards the ordination of women exposed how important gender and sexuality are in the interpretation of priesthood. That women were (and arguably still are) viewed by Church authorities largely in terms of their sex and

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<sup>4</sup> David Power describes the priest as acting *in persona Christi* when ‘he [sic] performs those central acts of the Church’s worship that are sanctifying... those wherein he formulates the apostolic witness and the Church’s beliefs’. (1992:99)

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, I Cor 11 3-16; Eph 5:22-24.

of their relationship to men is revealed in this comment made by the Archbishop's Commission on the priesthood of women in 1936:

The ministration of women will tend to produce a lowering of the spiritual tone of Christian worship...it would be impossible for the male members to be present at a service at which a woman ministered without becoming unduly conscious of her sex.<sup>6</sup>

Tales of abhorrence at the idea of pregnant, long-haired and/or attractive women priests presiding at the altar have been recorded by Norene Carter. There is apparent preoccupation with women's bodiliness and sexuality as a distraction from the spiritual:

Such views might simply be counted as ludicrous and left to sink under the weight of their own absurdity except for the fact that they expose the core of sexual panic and misogyny which has been present throughout the entire lengthy struggle over ordaining women. (Carter 1979:369)

Where some event occurs that changes the identity of the priesthood – as with the ordination of women priests - then there is change also to the symbolism and narrative shared by the community of faith. The presence of the unfamiliar is inherent in the nature of the symbol. The task for those concerned with liturgy is, as Joseph Gelineau remarks, to 'find the right balance and enough of the unfamiliar for the symbolism to work and not leave people simply immersed in their ordinary experience'. (Gelineau 1978:101) I explore here the unfamiliar in the symbols as introduced by the woman priest, and examine how these can engender new confidence in the power of the symbolism of the priesthood as a whole and in the effectiveness of the liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic Prayer, a pivotal point in the eucharistic liturgy, is a useful starting point for exploring through symbol and narrative whether, and how, the priest who is a woman extends worshippers' understanding of themselves as the Body of Christ in relationship with the divine, with each other and with the world. The Prayer is set in a narrative context and is spoken by the priest, accompanied by ritual gestures. It occurs between the two corporate actions of the offertory and communion, and starts after the Peace with a dialogue based on the opening of the Jewish table grace.<sup>7</sup> Apart from one new interactive prayer in Common Worship (Prayer H), the Eucharistic Prayer is said not by the whole congregation but by the Bishop or priest who does so, as Gregory Dix puts it, as 'one member of the body only on behalf of the body', spoken by one who represents the universal Church in all times and places. (Dix 1945:268) The priest's embodied presence, the spoken words and the accompanying gestures are all redolent with symbolic meaning. There is a great range within the Anglican Church in how far this symbolism is overtly expressed in the liturgy. In the Anglo-catholic tradition, a rich symbolism is evident, in respect of the

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Furlong, Monica (1991) *A Dangerous Delight: Women and Power in the Church* London: SPCK p.41.

<sup>7</sup> It is unclear whether the Last Supper was a Passover or not. However, according to Louis Bouyer, the main connection with the Passover, as with any meal, is the action of breaking the bread at the start, the thanksgiving of wine mixed with water at the end, and the blessings connected with these actions. (Bouyer 1968:97-9)

priest, of objects and of choreographed gesture and movement. The cycle of seasons, feast days and religious drama are strictly observed. Ritual may include processions, the lighting of candles, the wearing of particular garments and colours, the use of incense and bells and the adoption of certain gestures by the priest, particularly during the Eucharistic Prayer. All of these features characterise what David Tracy calls the 'analogical imagination' of the catholic tradition and of the predominant language of catholic theology.<sup>8</sup>

The more Reformed traditions tend to eschew the symbolic appeal of elaborate ritual and dramatic presentation. The emphasis is rather on teaching and hearing the Word through the reading and interpretation of Scripture, appealing more to the intellect than to a deep, perhaps unconscious, response to symbol. Word is privileged in expressing the holy, and discourse takes primacy over the power of holy things and actions to reveal the numinous. In attempting here to develop a theology of women's priesthood through the symbolism inherent in the ritual and narrative of the Eucharistic Prayer, I am speaking more from an Anglo-Catholic than from a low Evangelical position. Whilst acknowledging the experienced presence of God within the daily routine and through intellectual discourse, I follow Tracy's argument that it is through rituals, symbols and myths that we are invited to draw away from the banalities of time and space and enter the reality of the sacred. (Tracy 1981:206) Hence the value of reflecting on the narrative and symbol within the Eucharistic Prayer as it is recited by the priest, since it is at this moment, of all ritual events in the Christian liturgy, that the present has the potential to become most saturated with the power of the sacred.

George Stroup argues that:

'To be a true participant in a community is to share in that community's narratives, to recite the same stories as the other members of the community, and to allow one's identity to be shaped by them'. (Stroup 1981:132-3)

Christian narrative, Stroup maintains, is not merely a matter of story-telling but is a primary datum for theological reflection and 'the appropriate context in which to re-examine the nature of Christian identity.' (1981:17) Historical narratives, rooted in Scripture and tradition, are the foundation for 'Christian affirmations about the nature of God and the reality of grace'. (1981:17) The narrative of the Christian faith community informs and transforms members' understanding of themselves as creatures of God and as the Body of Christ. Narrative shares with liturgy (and indeed all human experience) a movement from the past to the future through the present, and gives shape to the experience of time by remembering the past and anticipating what is to come. Liturgy anticipates that the Christian story will be enacted within the individual worshipper and within the life of the faith community; the narrative retold and the symbolism expressed in

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology And the Culture Of Pluralism*, 1981. Similarly, Andrew Greeley contrasts the 'analogical' Catholic imagination with the 'dialectical' Protestant imagination. (*The Catholic Myth*, 1990 p.34)

worship reveal a transfiguring interaction between the liturgy and the life of the community in which that liturgy is performed.

When the Eucharistic Prayer is spoken by a woman priest, there is a shift, a fluidity, perhaps even a shock, in the symbolic charge: the presence of a woman celebrant in the Anglican Church is relatively new (and still, in the Church of England officially in a period of reception), so that the symbolic associated with her remains as yet novel, unstable and evolving. Moreover, her presence invites further reflection on the symbolic nature of the priesthood as a whole, since it brings up the question of genderisation of symbol and of narrative, and therefore of what (in an historically all-male priesthood) has previously been occluded or excluded from the normative. As Teresa Berger points out, Christian worship has always been deeply gendered, and 'the mainstream historical narrative of the liturgy has been shaped by the invisibility and/or exclusion of women.' (Berger 1999:5) The narrative of the liturgy, and the hearing of it by the congregation of worshippers, informs and shapes the sense of identity of the individual and of the community. Berger asks how valid this narrative can be 'with so much of the Body of Christ (to speak theologically) or the participants in the rites (to speak ritually) missing'. (1999:5) Poststructuralist feminist theory advocates suspicion of sexed identities and of gender dualism; yet most liturgy 'has, historically been shaped by exactly that way of constructing gender relations'. (1999:8) Women have historically made a place for themselves within an asymmetrically gendered liturgy where they have 'found space for encounter with God in, against, despite and because of the liturgy.' (1999:9) For at least some people, it seems, the way in which the faith story has been retold and re-enacted during the Eucharist may have militated against achieving a valid sense of identity as creatures of God within the community of faith.

The question is raised, therefore, as to how far women have been able to be true members of the faith community and its shared narratives when they have been excluded, on the grounds of physiological function, from many sacred rituals and spaces. Women have historically been essentially identified with the female body, as Tina Beattie puts it, 'for the purposes of exclusion, but never for the purpose of inclusion'. (1999:12) A tradition of asymmetrically gendered liturgy has constrained the shaping not only of women's sense of identity, but that of men's also where that tradition has propagated an understanding that the masculine/male is normative, is closer than the feminine/female to the divine and is destined to dominate others. The advent of women to Anglican priesthood has occasioned a paradigm shift in the symbolism and narrative of the faith community which shapes the sense of identity of all worshippers, since it offers resources to both women and men to reinterpret and reposition their identity within the faith tradition.

Within the discourse of gender and priesthood, bodies are a material consideration. Since gender has until very recently been critical in acceptance to the priesthood, then the bodiliness of the priest – particularly the woman priest – must be taken as significant. As philosopher of religion Pamela Sue Anderson comments, 'embodiment has been conceived as closely associated with women'. (Anderson 2002:41) Hence the ordination of women priests has

been problematic, not least because it has brought with it the challenge of a paradigm shift in received symbolisms relating to the body, to gender and to the sacred that has demanded a recognition of sexual difference. Anderson argues that, although beliefs may (wrongly) be taken as male-neutral, 'recognition of the sex-gendered perspectives of beliefs is part of a process which can only begin in discerning the sex-gendered shape of our conceptual scheme.' (2002:54)

A sex-gendered perspective is apparent in many recurring images in both Hebrew and Christian scripture, including the marital one. Associated with the notion of covenant, Yahweh is depicted as the husband of Israel and, in the New Testament, the Church is the bride. The image occurs, for instance, in the Song of Songs (5:1), interpreted in Jewish rabbinic literature as an expression of God's love for his spouse, Israel. (Chevasse 1939:43) In Isaiah, God is described as both the maker and husband of Zion (54:5), and he rejoices over Zion as a bridegroom over his bride (62:5).<sup>9</sup> Jerusalem, representing the people of God, is described variously as a forsaken wife, a barren woman, a daughter and a woman in labour. With the birth of the Church, this female figure of Hebrew scripture came to embody all those whom Christ has redeemed. Jesus alludes to the traditional image of God as husband and Israel as unfaithful wife when he talks of 'this adulterous and sinful generation' (Mark 8:38). Paul takes up the nuptial theme when he refers to members of the Church as children of God's promise, whose mother is Jerusalem, the heavenly city of God (Gal 4:21-31). The author of Revelation uses the imagery of a wedding to express the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church, for instance when an angel commands the writer to record 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' (Rev 19:9). The new Jerusalem, the heavenly city, is likened to a bride 'beautifully dressed for her husband' (21:2).

The God-as-husband image, then, says something of the perfect relationship between God and people that is the divine intent; and also of the broken relationship pertaining in the fallen world. The metaphorical bride or wife in much scriptural material is not only in a position of inequality and submission, correlating to the status of women in the period that the text was written; she has also been redeemed from a state of whoredom. The image of the adulterous wife was often adopted to depict the unfaithfulness of God's chosen people. For instance, God warns Moses that, after he has died, the people will 'prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering' (Deut 31:16); and Judges records how Israel prostituted itself by worshipping Gideon's ephod (Jud 8:27). From the beginning, as Raymond Ortlund argues, the marriage relationship was strained, and by the time of the prophetic literature it had developed into open conflict. (1996:45)

In this study I write from the perspective of Christian feminism with its interest in the question of identity, less through the abstract and rational than through the affective, the experiential, the somatic: that is, through embodiment.<sup>10</sup> Also key

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<sup>9</sup> Athalya Brenner comments that in the context of Isaiah 49-66, the image of God as husband is as common as that of God as father. (Benner 2003:164)

<sup>10</sup> For a comparison between a philosophy of religion derived from experience with one based largely on principles of reason, see Pamela Anderson 2002 pp. 43-48.

to my findings is the acknowledgement of sexual difference within the narrative of faith. Christian feminism understands difference between the sexes not in the dualistic sense of physiological, intellectual or spiritual superiority or inferiority, but rather as a distinctiveness in identity that is to be celebrated and included fully within the Body of Christ. Since women are so commonly defined by their gender and sexuality, I seek to distance feminine/female bodily metaphors from the masculine imaginary on which they are predicated and to look for a symbolic space for the feminine/female that is distinct and appropriate for real women.<sup>11</sup> This, I argue, has a meaningful bearing on the woman priest and her interaction with worshippers' perception, experience and understanding of their identity and vocation as members of the Body of Christ.

I take the subject position of a priest practising within the Anglican communion, with experience of ministry in the Church of England and, currently, in the Church in Wales. Using the Eucharistic Prayer as a common thread, I examine some key themes of Christian belief in the light of the advent of women priests. I do this by analysing the narrative of the Christian tradition as it has been handed down through the texts of the scriptures and liturgy, and particularly through challenges thus posed by feminist critiques of traditional, androcentric religious symbolism and interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Such critiques have brought to light the inappropriate, offensive and anachronistic nature of some long-standing symbols characteristic of past hierarchical, dominating structures that are unfamiliar if not unacceptable to many people today. The woman priest, I argue, can potentially overturn outdated symbols and reinvigorate others by challenging inculturated assumptions and inviting new insights into the nature of the divine, of the priesthood and of the Church. In retrieving the value and integrity of the feminine/female, I argue that the woman priest can also be instrumental in achieving full subjectivity for women in a culture that has historically been informed and dominated by a male religious imaginary.

Since the relationship between religion and gender is a serious and complex one, then there are implications as to the gender of those who do religion, including priests and what they symbolize. This being so, and because these symbols are so often polysemic<sup>13</sup> and carry such a weight of creative potential, it

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<sup>11</sup> I am using the term feminine/female and masculine /male to refer to both the biological characteristics pertaining to each sex and also the traits of behaviour and outlook traditionally ascribed more to one sex than to the other. This includes the symbolic level of imagery where notions of the masculine and the feminine can transcend individual lives, cultures and historical eras. This is not to ignore the fact that these terms are unstable in that they depend not so much on sex but on their cultural context. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza comments: 'What it means to be female/woman/feminine does not so much depend on one's sex but rather on one's location in the socio-symbolic kyriarchal system of multiform oppression.' (1998:92) Schussler Fiorenza uses the term 'kyriarchal' to define western society and family ruled by a master or lord. (Schussler Fiorenza 1998:131)

<sup>12</sup> Schussler Fiorenza defines 'androcentrism' as 'a linguistic structure and theoretical perspective in which man or male stands for human.' (1995:222)

<sup>13</sup> 'Polysemic' is defined by Caroline Bynum as having 'the quality of possessing manifold meanings'. (Bynum 1986:2)

is important to investigate what they imply in the actual circumstance of contemporary culture, aware that those who 'operate' the symbols are themselves not in control of how their meaning is often understood in wider society. Rowan Williams argues that, when using symbols, care must be taken not simply to 'reinforce patterns of inequality and/or to produce deep hurt and alienation'. (1984:21) In this case, what the woman priest stands for must not make it harder for women to belong to the Church which is part of a world that devalues female experience. Rather, women must be able to see it as a community of liberty and of reconciliation. I trust that what I offer here conforms to this imperative.

In offering a feminist reading of scripture, I am aware that a Christian interpretation of Christ bringing in the New Covenant can be deeply problematic to both Jewish and Christian theologians. My readings of scripture are narrative interpretations rather than exercises in biblical exegesis, and I am interpreting the scripture as a practising minister within the orthodox tradition of the Christian community. I acknowledge, however, that other communities of interpretation offer different readings – notably the Jewish community in their readings of Hebrew scripture. In particular, the issue around Christian anti-Judaism in critiquing the patriarchal establishment prevalent in biblical times is a matter of current Jewish-Christian dialogue. However, both Jewish and Christian feminism appeals to religious histories in addressing issues of the past in order to elevate the subjectivity and status of women.

I have structured this thesis as a three-sided discourse – a 'trialogue' – from the perspective of classical theology, current feminist analyses and my own experience and thinking as an Anglican woman priest. Chapters three to eleven constitute three groups of three chapters each, dealing with the themes of '*Imago Dei*', 'Broken Body, Broken World' and 'New Covenant, New Confidence'. The first chapter in each grouping is relatively short and offers a brief summary of the 'Received Wisdom' Of Classical Theology. The second chapter offers a more detailed analysis of some feminist perspectives, and the third chapter is written from the perspective of the woman priest, in which I develop my argument in each area of discourse in relation to a theology of women's priesthood. Apart from the first two chapters setting out my methodology, each of the subsequent three groups of chapters begins with an extract from the Eucharistic Prayer (in this case Prayer A, Common Worship).<sup>14</sup> From these phrases a variety of themes is developed. Chapters Three, Four and Five examine the notion of humans created in *imago Dei*, the lack of women's subjectivity and the potential contribution of the woman priest to the full subjectivity of all people, female and male. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, through the symbolism of bread, look at human relationship with the divine, with each other and with the natural environment. Here I examine how the woman priest contributes towards a potential female religious imaginary and language, and how she particularly stands as a witness to the responsibility of care towards the earth and of redemption from unjust relationships. Chapters Nine, Ten and Eleven consider the connection between blood and sacrifice, menstruation and misogyny which have hitherto prevented women entering the

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<sup>14</sup> A description and history of all the prayers A – H is given in Kenneth Stevenson 2002/5 pp.144-151.

priesthood. I also examine the woman priest's role in a gendered reading of the notion of self-sacrifice.

In developing my argument by means of a narrative approach to theology, I have engaged with a range of texts, mostly theological and philosophical, but I have maintained the narrative style throughout. In Chapters One and Two, I set out the methodology I have adopted, drawing particularly on the works of Paul Ricoeur, Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen.



*####Another story somewhere: army chaplain – red hair – advised to cut off.*

*Definition of phallogentric – Tina's email 1 Feb*

## CHAPTER 1

### THE EUCHARIST: SYMBOL AND NARRATIVE

I set out here some of Paul Ricoeur's key findings in the area of language and religion, and examine how these can be applied to a developing theology of women's priesthood.

#### *Ricoeur's Work On Symbol And Narrative*

In one of his earlier books, *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), and in essays of this period (published as *The Conflict Of Interpretations*, 1974) Ricoeur explores ideas about the meaning of one's identity through the articulation of belief, including the importance of symbols, which he sees as the location of the fullness of language. (Ricoeur 1974:xiii) A symbol, for Ricoeur, has a primary, literal sense which designates another sense that is indirect, secondary and figurative, and which can be apprehended only through the first sense. (1974:xiv) Ricoeur argues that we are not so much the creators of symbols as their creatures, and that philosophy is our ongoing attempt to discern the many meanings of symbols. The symbol invites interpretation since it 'says more than it says and...never ceases to speak to us'. (1974:28) Interpretation consists of 'deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.' (1974:xiv) This is done not by attempting to supersede the symbols with rational thought but by a new appreciation of the symbol through the disclosure of its meaning.

The symbol itself 'gives rise to thought'; (1967:348) it illumines and gives order to human experience, and as such is a means of finding and understanding human reality. (1967:355) The symbol, then, cannot be reduced to a simple sign; within it is a multitude of meaning. The literal meaning provides the symbolic meaning; the symbol 'gives' in the sense that the primary intentionality provides the second meaning. (1974:290) Ricoeur cites 'defilement' as an example of the double intentionality of symbol. The literal meaning is 'stain', but there is also the figurative meaning of ritual impurity or moral evil. (1967:15) The first, literal meaning leads to the second, symbolic meaning: the 'primary intentionality...gives the second meaning analogically'. (1967:16) The first intentionality removes the conventional sign from the natural one – for instance, the stain or deviation does not resemble that which is signified. Over and above this, however, is a second intentionality pointing to 'a certain situation of man in the Sacred' – a stained, sinful, guilty being. (1974:289) The obvious, literal meaning points to something *like* the stain or deviation. It is this opaqueness, a second meaning suggested by the literal meaning, that provides the symbol's profundity and 'inexhaustible depth'. (1974:290) It also poses a problem for the philosopher. The symbol is always opaque because it is given through analogy based on literal signification. It is contingent because it is subject to the great diversity of linguistic and cultural differences. It is given to thought only through interpretation: 'there is no myth without exegesis, no exegesis without contestation'. (1974:317) Moreover, since the richness of meaning is already there in the symbol before rational elaboration, there can be no single exegetical methodology for interpretation. (1974:317)

Symbols, in pointing to something beyond themselves and carrying polysemic and virtually inexhaustible meanings, articulate the world of the sacred. The primary

symbol, through our own experience, says something about us in relation to the ultimate reality of the sacred. Hence symbols resist literal interpretation. Through the primary meaning we come to share in the latent meaning and are thus brought to the symbolised without being able intellectually to dominate the similarity. Every symbol is 'finally a hierophany, a manifestation of the bond between man and the sacred.' (1967:356) The symbol needs to reveal itself before we attempt to dominate it with our own thoughts. We best enter the domain of symbol through a contemplative dialogue whereby, bringing our own personal experience, we allow the symbol to speak first in order for us to access its richness of meaning. (1974:297) To fully understand symbols, Ricoeur asserts that we need to move from hermeneutics to reflection: for him, the properly philosophical stage is that of 'thought starting from symbol'. (1974:298) Symbol is a 'revealing substrate' of speech because it actually gives rise to thought. (1974:299) The problem for Ricoeur at this point is how meaning can be disengaged from symbol so that thought can be put in motion without presupposing a given meaning and falling into the trap of the 'pseudo-knowing of dogmatic mythology'. (1974:299-300) To avoid gnosis, a false knowledge where symbol, image and parable 'congeal into a so-called knowing which sticks to the letter of the image.' (1974:272) Ricoeur suggests a creative interpretation that respects the enigmatic nature of the symbol but which brings out the meaning and gives it form through the mediation of 'autonomous systemised thought'. (1974:300)

Ricoeur sees the religious symbol as the key to understanding religious language. We have lost the immediacy of symbol that was characteristic of traditional, primitive religion. We may not be able to return to a primitive, pre-critical 'immediacy of belief'; this is irredeemably lost. (1967:351) He asks: 'How can the immediacy of the symbol and the mediation of thought be held together?' (1967:350) In a later work, Ricoeur explores whether there are transformative possibilities through recovering this immediacy, albeit mediated through a critical and revisable hermeneutic. (1995:2) He asks whether the symbol can be the starting point of our thinking, without compromising fully autonomous thought. This is not the 'first naïveté' of primordial openness to religious symbolism, but a 'second naïveté' of belief based on the traces of the sacred found in the text. (1995:2) The symbol's giving of meaning is bound together with the decipherment of a text in the modern hermeneutics. (1974:298)<sup>1</sup> Symbols, which precede hermeneutics, are an 'element of speech', and are therefore always interpreted: 'there exists nowhere a symbolic language without hermeneutics'. (1967:350) And modern hermeneutics, through critical thought, provide contact with 'the fundamental symbols of consciousness'. (1967:351) Through interpretation, then, we are able to 'hear again', to understand the meaning which the symbol offers. (1967:351) Symbol and criticism present a circular argument: 'We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand'. (1967:351)

Indeed, argues Ricoeur, it is only through interpreting that we can, in today's world, believe: 'It is the "modern" mode of belief in symbols, an expression of the distress of modernity and a remedy for that distress'. (1967:352) In and through criticism we hear the voice of the sacred. We communicate with the sacred by articulating the prior understanding which informs the interpretation. Criticism 'demythologizes' in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur expands on the task of hermeneutics in *From Text To Action: Essays In Hermeneutics*, 1974

gain truthfulness, intellectual honesty and objectivity. (1967:352)<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it 'brings to light the dimension of the symbol as a primordial sign of the sacred'. (1967:353) Thus, 'recharging...thought with the aid of symbols' is a corollary of the 'circle of believing and understanding in hermeneutics'. (1967:353) We take a wager on the truthfulness of particular symbolic meanings so that we can better understand ourselves and the world. By entering into a 'passionate, though critical, relation with the truth-value of each symbol', (1967:354) we can through hermeneutics come into the virtuous circle of belief for the sake of understanding, and understanding of the sake of believing. Hence the wager pays off in understanding: 'in betting *on* the significance of the symbolic world, I bet at the same time *that* my wager will be restored to me in power of reflection, in the element of coherent discourse'. (1967:357) Hermeneutics allows us to explore and reflect on the signification of symbol in liturgy, where second meaning is given through paying attention to the first, every-day meaning (for instance, the action of breaking and sharing bread in the context of the Eucharist reveals through the first meaning a second meaning of sacrifice, fellowship and community). The signification of such liturgical symbols cannot be reduced to a single or preconceived meaning without reducing its effect. Where a focal meaning may appear to be clear for a period, the polysemy of the symbol constantly demands fresh discursive thinking.

Symbols are not static. Some symbols may be iconoclastic in relation to others; they may also become 'solidified in an idolatry' (1967:354) when they are left to 'thicken and solidify'. (1974:293) There is enormous potential, around the symbolic attached to the priest, for such a solidification into idolatry and gnosis, where the symbol's meanings no longer give rise to thought but give way to a turgid, dogmatic mythology impervious to new experience and insight or to creative imagination. David Power, in his study of the renewal of Roman Catholic liturgy, points to the close association of symbol and the distribution of power identified with ecclesiastical (and other) systems. (Power 1984:25) Religious custom – influenced by political, economic, sexual and other factors - in this case occludes the valid meaning of the symbol and prevents the Gospel from being fully heard. By the same token, events may occur in the Church that challenge established customs and traditions that have fostered religious illusions and false mysticism, allowing for a creative force that enriches religious experience and contributes to the liberation of individuals and of communities. At the same time, there is always a fear that any given symbol of the sacred is also a return of the repressed. Ricoeur comments that 'every symbol of the sacred is also simultaneously...the re-emergence of both an ancient and an infantile symbol...There is always some trace of archaic myth which is grafted to and operated within the most prophetic meanings of the sacred.'(1974:333)

Symbolism, continually reinterpreted, speaks to the whole human being, including the will. (Ricoeur 1995:67) Ricoeur's early work invites recognition that symbols demand a response of commitment. The identity and action of the community of faith is shaped and developed as a witnessing community through worship; and worship must involve not only the intellect but the senses and the emotions – in fact, the whole of the body. Bodily experience, bodily feeling and tension are intrinsic to the celebration of the liturgy, and perhaps especially at the Eucharist, the central expression of Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur gives as an example the ordering of the universe into the heavens above, the earth in the middle and hell below. (1967:352)

worship. James Empeur argues that: ‘Something of transcendence will never reach visibility if our worshipping communities are not physical in their expression’. (Empeur 2000:138) So, for him, ‘the physicality of worship requires a spirituality of the body’. (2000:154) The link between liturgy and ethics is clear: liturgy is not its own justification, but depends on its conjunction with the ethical imperative and hope of the cross and the kingdom. Hence worship requires a response of commitment and action. Our response to God in our daily actions is focused – indeed initiated – in the ritual action of the liturgy, and in particular of the Eucharist, the focus of worship and of discipleship.

In developing his philosophical anthropology, Ricoeur moved in his later work from the interpretation of symbols towards the interpretation of narrative. He argues that, since we make sense of our temporal experience through the stories we tell, then in this sense history is a narrative fiction insofar as we select and interpret past events so that we can impose order and significance on them.<sup>3</sup> In Christian liturgy, ritual interacts with narrative, by which the Gospel message is retold and the hope of the kingdom is heard. Ricoeur’s theory of narrative is helpful here in that the symbolic identity of the priest and of all members of the Body of Christ is to a large extent constructed and bound by the shared narratives of the religion. The symbols of faith do not stand alone but derive meaning from the Christian narratives. The liturgy of the Eucharist is *par excellence* a narrative event, in the ministry both of the Word and of the Sacrament. Through the narrative of the text – that is, through both telling and enacting the faith story – the liturgy gives shape to the identity and experience of the individual and of the community, and points towards what is to come.

Ricoeur’s work on narrative brings him to develop a language of hope, central to religion, in which the present is a moment when the passion for the possible turns into action. The Eucharist is quintessentially such a moment, when the narrative of faith being re-enacted and re-told, remembering the past and looking to the future, strengthens the individual and communal narrative identity, and invites from the worshipper a response. The re-telling and re-enacting of the story of faith is done in order to evoke a commitment, to gain new insight, to mould lives, to have a bearing on character. The words and actions of the priest at the altar re-enact and re-tell the Christian story of faith, affirming in the worshippers, individually and communally, the narrative identity that is essential to self-understanding. We are reminded of our part in the grand narrative, our inheritance from the past and our future destiny, within the continuing Christian story. The narrative of priest and congregation is embedded in an ancient history continually re-remembered in the form of symbol and story, and therefore open with successive generations to fresh interpretation and insight.

The present time, in embracing both the remembered past and the potential for the future, is when the passion for the possible turns into action. For Ricoeur, the power of the narrative to offer possibilities of human existence begins in the correspondence

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<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur develops a general theory of narrative discourse that draws together the narrative of history, tied to the contingent, and that of fiction, which is mimetic. He asks, ‘Could we not say...that by opening us to what is different, history opens us to the possible, whereas fiction, by opening us to the unreal, leads us to what is essential in reality?’ (1981:296) See also Hayden White, ‘The Metaphysics Of Narrativity: Time And Symbol In Ricoeur’s Philosophy Of History’ in Wood, D., ed. *On Paul Ricoeur* pp.140-59

between narrative and the human experience of existence. Our 'selfhood' emerges through both time and narrative and is expressed in the context of both change and continuity in which each person acts and reacts. He asks: 'What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and, in general, of all that we can call the *self*, if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature?' (1995:143) Ricoeur argues that in a literary work (or a work of art) discourse escapes from the here-and-now situation and takes on a new status – the status of a text.<sup>4</sup> The process of distanciation develops as the text transcends its native circumstances and moves beyond into territories where it is circumscribed by new horizons. With the passage of time and changes in socio-cultural contexts and linguistic codes, the alterity of the text becomes more marked and therefore subject to polysemic interpretation. In the process of distanciation, the event itself is eclipsed by the meaning of what is said, and this meaning is itself then severed from the intentions of the original speaking subject. In other words, as John Thompson remarks, 'the objective meaning of a text is something other than the subjective intentions of its author.' (Thompson 1981:14) The author no longer holds a predominant role in the understanding of the text. Distanciation leads the reader to shift understanding from sense to reference, 'from that which it says to that which it says about it'. (1981:15)

For Ricoeur, narrative is bound up with the question of human identity and the meaning of human existence – both of which are narrative in shape. Narrative makes sense of the temporality of our experience. We share and pass on stories because narrative identity is central to our self-understanding; it tells us, among other things, about our character and that of others.<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur asks, 'do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them?' (Ricoeur 1991b:188) Essential to self-understanding for many of us is the theme not only of our present life but also of the grand narrative of our origin, our *telos*<sup>6</sup> and our ultimate destination in terms of how our individual narrative identity fits within that of the Christian narrative. Ricoeur does not assign primacy to biblical narrative in re-describing reality. For him, narrative mediates self interpretation, and all forms of literary discourse, whether historical or fictional (or, I would add, scriptural), have potential to transform one's experience and open up new possibilities for understanding. He does contend, however, that all narrative constitutes a genre that can act as a medium of revelation for the reader. (1995:16)<sup>7</sup> He comments:

we might say that a theology that confronts the inevitability of the divine plan with the refractory nature of human actions and passions is a theology that

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<sup>4</sup> See *Hermeneutics & The Human Sciences* (Ricoeur 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hauerwas defines character as 'not a theoretical notion, but merely the name we give to the cumulative source of human actions'. (1989:178) For Hauerwas, stories show how 'human actions and passions connect with one another to develop a character'. (1989:178)

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich defines *telos* as expressing the 'inner, essential, necessary aim, for that in which a being fulfils its own nature'. (1953:276)

<sup>7</sup> As well as being a medium of revelation to the reader, it might be added that biblical narrative, especially in the context of liturgy, is also a medium of revelation to the listener and participator.

engenders narrative; better, it is a theology that calls for the narrative mode as its major hermeneutical mode. (1995:182)

Applying Ricoeur's later work to the Jewish and Christian faiths, it is clear that, embedded as they are in an ancient history, they are expressed and passed on in narratives of past events that are interpreted as redemptive and transformative, so that these events continue to offer meaning to the present and hope in the future. Christian narrative is a living tradition open to reinterpretation by successive generations who interpret their identity narrative through their shared symbols and stories. Each community will be influenced by its traditions and by its unique situation in place and history. George Stroup points out that, as the community responds to changes in the world, so it needs subtle shifts in its identity narrative in order to present a meaningful identity to the world. (Stroup 1981:164) Ongoing interpretation of the narrative is required 'to actualise the tradition in the present, to enable the contemporary community to experience the power mediated by redemptive events'. (1981:168) Ricoeur's work on narrative tends to focus on literature – that is, written text. It is possible, however, to treat other forms as a 'text' and use Ricoeur's methodology to interpret them. Thus, treating the eucharistic liturgy as a text through which the faith story is told, it can be argued that the advent of the woman priest was in itself a result of a shift (unacceptable for some) in the narrative identity of the faith community; and that it continues to invoke such a shift in how, and with what consequences for action, the actualization of the tradition is made present.

Language and text are for Ricoeur the focus for exploring narrative and therefore the means of understanding human existence. For him, metaphors and narratives are the language of hope – forms of the passion for the possible – through which we are always attempting to configure the riddles of our existence. Hence the need, as explored in *Oneself As Another*, (1992) to come back to the question of action and morality. Here Ricoeur aims to articulate an ethical theory within the theory of a self and its relation to narrative; he makes a plea on behalf of a narrative identity by arguing that the question of 'Who am I, actually?' implies an exploration of the common boundary between narrative identity and ethical theory. (1992:139) All narratives have ethical dimensions in the sense of an invitation to evaluate character and behaviour. They also evidence a primacy of the other-than-self over the self. Thus I, as a responsive self, hope that my responsiveness to others might bring about a better life for others. (1992:165-8)

Ricoeur proposes that there are two poles of personal identity at the core of narrative identity. On the one side there is *idem*, or identity as *sameness*, self viewed in terms of a sameness of substance and resembling the permanence in time of the thing. This may also be called character, a group of innate or acquired attitudes and abilities. *Idem* responds to the question 'What am I?' and implies character as a set of lasting dispositions by which I am recognised. It denotes stasis, and permanence in time. On the other side is *ipse*, or *selfhood*, a dynamic identity that is constantly under construction. It implies no unchanging core of identity, but the self that captures its motility, its ability to change and develop. Selfhood includes trustworthiness and faithfulness to oneself amongst all the deviations and transformations one experiences through time. *Iipse* responds to the question 'Who am I?' with the response 'Here I am' - a halt in the wandering when faced with so many models for action, some of which actually 'paralyse the capacity for firm action'. (1992:167) The *ipse* of self-constancy can transcend the *idem* of character; for instance, even when I am by my character

resistant to keeping my word I nevertheless do so. 'Self-constancy is for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can *count on* that person.' (1992:165)

The polar opposition between self-constancy and character highlights for Ricoeur the ethical dimension of selfhood, mediated by narrative identity, which links 'the permanence in time of character and that of self-constancy'. (1992:166) Between the imagination that claims 'I can try anything' and the caution that says 'Everything is possible but not everything is beneficial' comes a concordance: 'Here is where I stand!' (1992:168) The dialectic relationship I have with myself in trying to remain true to myself, despite the vagaries of life, makes it also possible for me to be true to others, so that others can trust me. Thus I develop consistency in my own identity: hence the place of ethics and of narrative within a philosophy of selfhood. *Ipse*, as narrative identity, can be applied not only to an individual but also to the self-constancy of a community: 'Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history'. (1988 vol 3:247)

### ***Applying Ricoeur's Work On Symbol And Narrative To A Theology Of Women's Priesthood***

Religious symbolism is best understood in its ritual context. We have confidence in the rites in which we partake only insofar as we have confidence in the effectiveness of their symbolism – that is, its meaning and its transformative power both for the individual and for the community. So does the symbol of the woman priest at the altar offer new and recovered meanings in the realm of the transcendent? Does it also serve to initiate social renewal in the invitation to decision and action? Or is the feminine/female represented in the woman priest simply to be ignored, so that the woman priest is regarded as an 'honorary man', whose gender is of no import and who is freighted therefore with symbolism identical to that of the male priest? Yet the body, perhaps especially during ritual acts, cannot be ignored; indeed, the eucharistic liturgy, including those actions performed by the priest, can be understood as a bodily narrative.<sup>8</sup> Bruce Morrill observes that any celebration of liturgy is charged with bodily tensions embracing gender as well as other distinctions. (Morrill 2000:2) The way these tensions are approached is related to whether a community is embracing the 'diverse complexity of bodily living as opportunities for sacramentally encountering the gracious favour of God or suppressing the body as an obstacle to what is "truly" holy and spiritual'. (2000:4) The woman priest at the altar is visibly and audibly a representative of the feminine/female, and this factor must have a bearing on the symbolism of priesthood as borne by her. The symbol is not neutral but demands a response; a shift in the symbolism, as initiated by women's priesthood, must cause a shift in the dialogue between ourselves and the divine, and hence in our action, our way of life. Since the symbolic language of religion, whether the text of scripture or of liturgy, gives insight into transcendent reality, then the woman priest must open up new insights and possibilities into that reality and must necessitate a revised hermeneutics of those texts.

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<sup>8</sup> David Power explores this theme in depth in *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature Of Liturgy* (1984).



Ricoeur notes that the symbol, continually reinterpreted, speaks to the whole person, not least the will. (Ricoeur 1995:67) The woman priest shifts and adds to the rich symbolism of the priesthood, which calls for a response of action and commitment in hitherto hidden ways. Paul Tillich points out that we enter into manifestations of the power of the sacred in ritual, symbol and myth. (Tillich 1981:206) With the woman priest, the ordinary reality that has taken on that symbolism is the bodily presence of the feminine/female, with all its attendant symbolism of uncontrollable power, fear, evil and closeness to nature. The woman priest necessitates a new interpretation of the ancient symbols attached to the feminine/female and a challenge to render invalid those symbols made obsolete in the light of the Christian narrative that affirms the equality of all in the image of God. To borrow from Ricoeur, this would not empty language, but rather fill it anew by reinterpreting an ancient symbolism, 'starting from its very fullness, where symbol resides. (Ricoeur 1974:288) We are no longer caught in the immediacy of belief of an ancient religious symbolism, but enter a 'second naiveté' of belief based on the traces of belief found in the text.

The listeners or readers of the text receive and interpret it, according to Ricoeur, through a three-stage process of mimesis (a term borrowed from Aristotle, who defined plot as the mimesis of an action). (Ricoeur 1984 vol 1:xi) Ricoeur describes the three stages in the process of interpretation as: mimesis<sub>1</sub> (prefiguration of the field of action), mimesis<sub>2</sub> (configuration of the field of action), and mimesis<sub>3</sub> (refiguration of the field of action). Prefiguration describes the way in which the field of human acting is always already prefigured with certain basic competencies, such as the use and understanding of symbols and the temporal structures governing the syntagmatic order of narration (the 'followability' of a narrative). Prefiguration enables us to make coherent our immediate experiences. Configuration concerns narrative 'emplotment', which gives diverse elements of a situation an imaginative order, as does the plot of a story. Emplotment configures events, agents and objects and renders those individual elements meaningful as part of a larger whole. Emplotment forges a causal continuity from a temporal succession, and so creates the intelligibility and credibility of the narrative. As we engage with a narrative it reveals to us a configuration of events, an emplotment that 'transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole which is the correlate of the act of assembling the events together and which makes the story followable'. (Ricoeur 1984 vol 1:67)

The reader's relationship with the text, however, does not occur in a vacuum: it is bound to received paradigms which influence one's expectations and interpretation of the narrative. There are 'holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination' within the text which leave the reader to join in the process of emplotment. (1984:77) Refiguration concerns the integration of the imaginative perspective into concrete, lived experience - what Ricoeur calls 'the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader. (1984:71) Through refiguration one integrates the story into one's own identity and self-understanding. Mimesis is a cyclical interpretative process. (1984:71) With the passage of time one's circumstances change and allow for new experiences and new interpretations of past events. Reinterpretation offers possibilities for revisioning a future inspired by hope: 'the hermeneutic circle of narrative and time never stops being reborn from the circle that the stages of mimesis form'. (1984:76)

I intend to make use of Ricoeur's threefold process of mimesis with regard to developing a theology of women's priesthood against the backdrop of the received Christian narrative. I have already noted in the Introduction that the Christian narrative

as we have received it is regarded by many as problematically androcentric, having been recorded and interpreted largely by men operating in a continuously patriarchal tradition. The story has been configured and refigured by a range of faith communities according to their own circumstances and aspirations, often offering different meanings from that of the original writers, and nearly always from an androcentric perspective. I have shown that some of the great themes of the Christian narrative, such as the bride and groom, the husband and wife, reflect the patriarchal interpretations and assumptions about the relationship between women, men and God current not only at the early development of the stories but also through the history of their refiguration. In the light of latter feminist research and reflection they may now be seen to ignore or deny women's experience, dignity and subjectivity.

Many feminist commentators conclude that the way women have been depicted in biblical texts, and the way such texts have hitherto been interpreted and acted upon, leaves them simply as objects of the male imagination and desire, with no room for their own integrity, desire or aspirations. In this study, in applying the notion of mimesis towards a theology of women's priesthood, I set out in Chapters 3, 6 and 9 the historic narrative and some of its configurations within traditional discourse as they relate to each of the three main areas under discussion. In each following chapter I then explore how these narratives have been critiqued, challenged and deconstructed by feminist research and analysis, largely but not exclusively in the field of philosophy of religion and theology. In Chapters 5, 8 and 11 I offer a refigured interpretation on each theme from a feminist perspective as it pertains to and is impacted by the woman priest.

Ricoeur's theory of interpretation was formulated with respect to texts, and I have applied this theory here to the eucharistic liturgy. However, as Thompson comments, it can be applied to other domains. For instance, action may be regarded as text, insofar as it 'may be objectified in a way that embodies...distanciation', whereby, for example, the objectification of action is marked by 'the eclipse of the event of doing by the significance of what is done'. (Ricoeur 1995:15) Human action as much as literary text possesses an internal structure as well as projecting a possible world, a 'potential mode of human existence which can be unfolded through the process of interpretation'. (1995:16) The human subject, then, and not the text, becomes the object of analysis: 'the subject becomes, under a hermeneutic analysis, "like" a text' (Ihde 1974:xv) – a text that is symbolic and therefore requiring interpretation in a way that takes account of the hidden meaning of the text-self.

Ricoeur's textual focus has also been questioned by Ronald Grimes. Writing from the perspective of ritual criticism, he accepts that narratives help us to understand the religious aspects of our existence, so that we can make sense of the world. However, he questions the primacy given to some narrative over ritual in human and religious identity, (Grimes 1990:160) and asks whether ritual enactment is not as effective as narration as a means of understanding identity.<sup>9</sup> (1990:162) Narrative theology, in the form of retelling the faith story (through reading, liturgical drama and so on) is done to correlate those stories with the life stories of individuals and the community. The gap

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<sup>9</sup> Grimes describes ritual studies as an investigation into all forms of 'performance, enactment, and other forms of overt gestural activity,' all of which are designed by mortals and therefore open to assessment and improvement. (Grimes 1990:9)

between the Christian metanarrative and individual life stories has to be bridged in a way that allows a meaningful and transformative response from the individual and the community. Ricoeur comments that biblical narratives 'reach their full meaningfulness when re-enacted in a cultic situation'. (1995:243) He affirms the close link between the symbolism of the sacred and ritual, since the sacred reveals itself not only in meaningful signs but also in significant behaviour, for instance around a particular space or object, or at particular times and seasons. (1995:51)

In *The Symbolism Of Evil* Ricoeur examines the importance of symbolic language to the integrity of rituals of purification, (1974:291) but does not extend his argument to other areas of ritual, for example Christian sacramental rites other than absolution. However, I suggest that, given Ricoeur's affirmation of the close association between symbol and ritual, it is feasible to regard the priest's role during the Eucharistic Prayer as a narrative. Ricoeur privileges stories and histories as a means to discover what is possible individually and in community. As historical beings we are constantly affected by both memories of the past and expectations of the future, and as such we 'equate life with the story or stories that we can tell about it'. (1991b:194-5) The interpretation of the ritual performed by the priest – and indeed of what is represented by the priest – can be read as a text. I intend to draw on Ricoeur's understanding of narrative, in engagement with certain contemporary feminist theologians, to inform an interpretation of the role of the priest within the 'text' of the eucharistic liturgy.

Grimes contends that the hiatus between the Christian narrative and individual life can be bridged by ritual, which links story and ethics: 'As we enact ritually, so we narrate theologically and act ethically.' (Grimes 1990:162). Grimes is critical of theologians who, in his view, leave out ritual in their discourse, or use it only as illustrative of narrative. (1990:162) He argues that for narrative theologians, ethics implies the sort of action that occurs in community and political life rather than in ritual enactment. He asks, 'What would happen if the road from narrative to ethics passed through ritual?' (1990:163) The ritual-dramatic stage between the narrative experience and the ethical judgment is, for Grimes, the opportunity to embody ethics, since 'Most of our utterances lack sufficient body and drama to arc all the way across the gap, thus connecting text and event'. (1990:165) Thus ritual becomes the place 'to practise living with dissonance between things said and things done'. (1990:166) I concur with Grimes that narrative theology must also be ritual theology if we are to understand and enact our faith. (1990:173) Hence the importance of reinterpreting the 'text' of recitation by the woman priest of the Eucharistic Prayer, in the light of what this adds to our faith story and what it says to us about our actions as moral agents.

In dealing with the Christian narrative, and bearing in mind the arguments of Thompson and Grimes, I refer to text not only in terms of scripture and its interpretation but in terms of liturgy and of the woman priest as herself a 'primordial sign of the sacred.' (Ricoeur 1967:353) I suggest that the notion of distanciation, if applicable to human action as well as to text, can be extended to the liturgy of the Eucharist, and not only to the text of the Eucharistic Prayer but also to the symbolic actions performed by the priest whilst reciting the Prayer. The symbolism around the figure of the priest has caused a 'collision' which requires a fresh interpretation of that symbolism. Also required is a re-interpretation of the narrative represented, re-enacted and re-told by the priest. Ricoeur uses the term 'distanciation' with reference to symbol and literary work. The priest is symbol; in performing the liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest can

also be said to be 'like' a text, in the sense that Thompson makes the argument about human actions possessing internal structure and putting forward a potential mode of human existence, unfolded through interpretation. From this point of view, Christian texts, in the form of scripture or of ritual action, can be found rebarbative to many women since they seem to contradict the Christian message that all are equally loved and valued by God. Hence the need for Ricoeur's notion of a hermeneutics that continually and critically reinterprets symbol, text and theology. Such a hermeneutics can liberate the rich symbolic narrative of the Christian tradition from what Tina Beattie calls 'its subservience to androcentric and patriarchal prerogatives' (1999:3) which has tended to exclude the female body from the story of salvation. (1999:2)

The Christian story is in some ways provisional, since it is not yet concluded, but continues in the unfolding narrative of the Body of Christ. The woman priest is part of the provisionality of the Christian narrative, in that women's priesthood requires a new and continuing hermeneutics of the story of faith in the light of a renewed understanding of our individual and communal identity as creatures of God and as the Body of Christ. Such a hermeneutics allows for the exploration of layers of meaning latent in the symbol/text-self but hitherto hidden because of the limitations imposed by a male-only priesthood. New nuances of meaning can now surface in the Christian narrative through the figure of the woman priest. For example, God as Father and Israel as bride and whore require a renewed interpretation and invite fresh insights into the history of the faith community. These in turn lead to a refiguration of narrative identity in terms of character and selfhood. They would also have a bearing on the response in terms of potential action – Ricoeur's language of hope, which for him looks outwards towards political and social justice.

The woman priest confronts the conflicts and tension around bodiliness and traditional constructions of gender. Erin White points out that the male body, in a patriarchal culture, is taken to be paradigmatic, and the imagination turns to the female body only where this is specified. (White 1995:93) Notwithstanding the process of distanciation, texts today still tend to be read from an androcentric viewpoint, even when they appear to be non-gendered; and as White demonstrates, gender is present in most texts and symbols, at least implicitly. (1995:93) If we consider the priest and the priestly ritual actions as texts, we must conclude that the male priest, inheriting such a long history of male-only priesthood within a highly patriarchal institution, is unavoidably associated with the traditions and attitudes of that institution and the culture in which it is embedded. The symbols associated with the texts of priest and liturgy are overwhelmingly weighted with androcentric meanings and referents, and tend to be interpreted from an androcentric perspective.

Ricoeur describes the potential for iconoclasm in one symbol compared to another. (1967:354) The symbolic attached specifically to the woman priest is open to iconoclastic potential in breaking open long-held meanings to new interpretations that might enrich, challenge or renew the tradition. It might be argued that the symbol of the exclusively male priest had, to borrow from Ricoeur, tended to 'thicken, to become solidified with an idolatry', (1967:353) since it was inextricably associated with the patriarchal privileging of the male as more able to image the divine. Such a tradition obscured the value and potential in the feminine/female also to image the divine, and so was caught in an ideology incapable of fully rendering the Christian message of equality and inclusivity. I explore in this study how androcentric theology has through history occluded and perverted feminine/female aspects of the divine and of ourselves as creatures of God from the self-identity of the church. A pervasive and long-standing

androcentric culture has constrained the symbolic of the priest, so that its potential in inviting a response and challenging our ways of knowing has always been repressed. Women's priesthood has raised the question as to whether a hitherto exclusively male priesthood was ever able sufficiently to reveal the nature of the divine or to represent the whole Church. It might be argued that the symbolism attached to such a priesthood had become ossified by its gendered exclusivity, and so, being restrictive rather than liberating, no longer able to express an adequate correlation with final revelation.

The woman priest, however, destabilises the old symbolism which has now become obsolete. As I shall show in the following pages, she questions the received wisdom found in established, patriarchal notions about the nature of God and of humankind, and how this affects our relationship with the divine, with each other and with creation. She also questions what the response should be to the new insights and applications of the enriched symbolism of the priesthood that embraces both men and women. The themes I develop each demonstrate that the Church's history of patriarchy has ensured that, by her gender, a woman priest eminently symbolises the journey from rejection to inclusion, from reviled to beloved, from otherness to potential subjectivity. I suggest that the woman priest transforms meanings and interpretations bound by the confines of patriarchy and allows new (or re-discovered) possibilities that have hitherto been ignored, or even deliberately hidden. There is now an opportunity to discover new, forgotten or neglected second meanings given in the first meaning of the symbol system of the priesthood and of the Eucharist. The shift in the symbol system inaugurated by the woman priest gives rise to new thoughts along with a fresh perception of the process. I explore how some symbols attached to the feminine/female have been banished in patriarchal culture from holy spaces and objects; and argue that through the medium of the woman priest some of these symbols can be rehabilitated into the Christian tradition in order to enrich and deepen the narrative of faith. In so doing, I argue, the Church will be better able to meet the challenge of relating contemporary experience both to our rich Christian symbolic heritage and to the kind of future promised in the symbol of God's kingdom.

Both individuals and communities understand and articulate their identity in the form of narrative. For Stroup, a Christian identity 'emerges from the collision between an individual's identity narrative and the narratives of the Christian community'. (Stroup 1981:88) A 'collision' may also be inevitable (and desirable) between the community's tradition and continuing revelation. The introduction of the woman priest, for instance, invites a revisiting of traditional interpretations of Scripture and of liturgy, with a hermeneutics of suspicion applied with regard to longstanding androcentric interpretations. There may also be a 'collision', where a community with a woman priest has made a shift in its interpretation of the common, shared narrative, but where an incoming individual experiences unfamiliarity and possibly a degree of shock. Thus the narrative displayed in the 'text' of the liturgy enables us to make sense of our own existence as individuals and as communities, whilst also helping us to gain new insights into our character and actions. Such a collision must also call for a response, a reaction that may be transformative. Has there not been for many women a negating type of collision with the Christian narrative, in their experience of exclusion from priesthood, from ritual, from holy spaces, from the lectionary, from scripture and from interpretations of biblical texts? Taking the woman priest as the locus of interpretation, we can reinterpret symbols and narratives of our faith story to demonstrate the value of the feminine/female, which in turn invites a response that liberates us from traditional

androcentric and patriarchal ways of hearing, understanding and responding to our faith story.

Teresa Berger contends that 'the gender of a worshipper fundamentally shapes that person's liturgical life'. (Berger 1999:6) Concurring with this statement, I argue that the woman priest inaugurates transformation via the collision of the individual and the community with a fresh insight into the interpretation of the Christian narrative and the 'text' of the eucharistic liturgy. I also contend that the presence of the woman priest invites radical reinterpretation of those aspects of the Christian narrative that have been circumscribed by an androcentric worldview and by patriarchal culture. Moreover, the woman priest also causes us to re-evaluate our gendered response to the Christian narrative. Women's narratives are different from men's narratives; women's interpretation of and response to narratives are different from those of men. The woman priest exposes gendered aspects of the story of faith that have hitherto remained unrecognized by androcentric interpretations, and invokes a response that opens up questions of gendered difference.

A note of caution on the question of woman as subject is given by Mary McClintock Fulkerson, in that not all women are the same. She criticizes the tendency to treat the issue of woman generically by appealing to 'women's experience'. Woman is a constructed subject and cannot be universalised. (1994:6) Nevertheless, although care must be taken not to generalise about women's narratives or women's experience, it can be said that these are different from those of men, not least because, as Fulkerson comments, woman as subject has been 'constructed out of social relations that feature multiple forms of gender oppression.' (1994:7) In this sense, the woman priest serves to retrieve or re-member those narratives which may be helpful in informing women, whatever their cultural or social background, of their true identity as children of God. Moreover, she helps to reinterpret those Christian narratives which have traditionally been interpreted through an androcentric lens, often to the detriment of the identity and status of all women.

Ricoeur's theory of personal identity can be applied to that of the Christian individual and the community. There is evidently a stable core of identity, a character by which the Christian individual and community is recognised and known. There is also the dynamic *ipseity* of change and adaptation to continuing revelation and evolving circumstances. The self-constancy of the Body of Christ allows it to remain true to its identity and calling as ongoing circumstances require a response. Hence there is an inseparable link between liturgy and ethics, since liturgy inherently calls for a response in the worshipper and moulds the identity of the worshipping community. The Eucharist serves to initiate social transformation in that the event calls for decision and commitment.

The priest is pivotal, not least at the celebration of the Eucharist, in expressing the common boundary between narrative identity and ethical theory. In re-telling and re-enacting the faith story, the priest plays a part in the actualisation of the narrative in affecting and shaping the understanding and intentionality of worshippers. The role of the priest at the Eucharist symbolises the strong link between worship and action. With the woman priest causing a shift in the symbolism of priesthood, then the selfhood of the individual worshipper and the worshipping community may grow and change with the new circumstance of the signifier and what is signified. Within the narrative identity of the believing individual and community, self-constancy may lead to new or broader

areas of ethical concern, perhaps in regard to environment, social justice and so on. As the presence of the woman priest requires a re-examination and refiguration of the Christian faith story, so, as moral agents, Christians must make actions fit with new insights thus gained. At the same time, the faith community must make subtle changes to its own narrative identity in order to offer a meaningful identity to a changing world. (Stroup 1981:164). The woman priest is one part of that subtly shifting narrative which lends the Church a meaningful identity to a wider community where, at least in the West, there has been significant advancement in the economic, political and social status of women.

As the author's intentions can have no privileged role in the interpretation of text, so the original intentions of those who first developed and passed on an understanding of the priest's role and of particular priestly movements and gestures cannot be privileged in today's hermeneutics. The reader of a text may find some meaning, not hidden behind the text but rather disclosed in front of it, pointing to a possible world. (Ricoeur 1981:15) Hence 'we are not allowed to exclude the final act of personal commitment from the whole of objective and explanatory procedures that mediate it.' (Ricoeur 1991c:167) We must, then, pay attention not only to the original and traditional explanations and understandings of the priest's role and ritual actions at the altar, but also to any new or alternative or developing explanations and understandings that may arise in our time and place. This 'hermeneutical circle' between understanding and explanation allows for 'the final act of personal commitment' which follows on from objective and explanatory procedures. (Ricoeur 1991c:167) I argue that the presence at the altar of the priest who is a woman is 'like' the text that requires to be understood as well as explained.

For Ricoeur, not only symbol but faith itself is demythologized, since theology comes after the fundamental, primary symbol. (Ihde 1974:xix) Faith itself must undergo criticism and is demythologized through a hermeneutics of suspicion and of belief. (Ihde 1974:xx) I argue that the advent of the woman priest requires such a demythologization of symbol and of the Christian faith narrative, particularly where tradition has imposed certain genderised interpretations on texts and rituals. These are now open to reinterpretation, since with the woman priest comes a new array of symbolic meanings that widen the hermeneutic circle of explanation and understanding, and broaden the horizons of the possible world. I argue that with the woman priest comes an enriched symbolism, not only of the priesthood itself but of the Body of Christ as a whole, thereby (to draw on Ricoeur) filling the language of faith anew, recharging it by starting from its very fullness, where symbol resides. (1974:288) The woman priest adds to the ceaseless reinterpretation of ancient Christian symbolism and speaks 'not only to our understanding and will but also to our imagination and our heart; in short, to the whole human being'. (Ricoeur 1995:67)

This is the case in the central rite of the Eucharist, where the Christian story is re-told and re-enacted, and where the worshipper is absorbed into that story through its ritual enactments. (I am treating the Christian story here not as history but as a symbolic narrative which shapes the identity and actions of the believing individual and community through its ritual). The priest re-enacts and re-tells the story of the Last Supper (and also the history of Israel) and worshippers respond in terms of confession, commitment and action. Jesus Christ is 'actualised' as worshippers participate, remember and respond. (Stroup 1981:254) A new hermeneutic required by the advent of women priests brings to light a further richness in understanding what priesthood

stands for – for instance, the trinitarian characteristics of mutuality, reciprocity, nurturing, inclusivity, features that have previously been somewhat obscured by the symbolism of an exclusively male priesthood. Narrative remains the glue which binds the community together, (Stroup 1981:132) but the shift in the symbolism of priesthood requires a fresh interpretation of that common narrative and hence a fresh understanding of the community's identity and the principles by which it lives.

If, as Ricoeur argues, we are creatures rather than creators of symbols, then the woman priest does not herself impose new meanings on the ancient symbol of the priest, but rather uncovers layers and nuances of meaning that have been latent in a hitherto restricted and narrow dominant symbolism. Hence the need for a fresh hermeneutic for unfolding these layers of meaning and finding a way back to a renewed appreciation of the meaning of the symbol. The work and insights of feminist theologians is useful here in uncovering and disclosing symbolic meanings which have been ignored or distorted through the patriarchal history of the Church. Through the lens of feminist theology, we can enter into what Ricoeur calls a 'passionate, though critical, relation with the truth-value for each symbol'. (Ricoeur 1967:354) We take a wager on the truthfulness of symbolic meaning as revealed by this new understanding, and hence are able make a commitment in the response which that symbol invites.

It must be pointed out that Ricoeur himself has been charged with an androcentric bias in his theory of hermeneutics. White finds this, for instance, both in his reading of the myth of Adam and Eve and in his failure to critique that myth as itself androcentric. (1995:81)<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur writes of the need for symbols to be treated with a hermeneutics of suspicion, since all contain 'phantasms' or traces of archaic myths. Yet, as White comments, he never identifies misogyny as such a phantasm or the false consciousness of patriarchy as 'the great archaic myth underlying Western culture'. (White 1995:89) Indeed, he never discusses gender as a significant factor in the formation of narrative identity.<sup>11</sup> White concedes that Ricoeur is here simply subscribing to the patriarchy that is the 'common ideology or prevailing hermeneutic of the West'; (1995:78) and that nevertheless it is possible to explore his hermeneutic from a feminist perspective in order to achieve a more balanced construction of gender. To more adequately contribute towards a theology of women's priesthood, and bearing in mind the problem of gender construction, I turn now to the work of feminist writers, and in particular to that of Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen.

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<sup>10</sup> See Ricoeur's argument in *The Symbolism Of Evil*. (1967)

<sup>11</sup> Neither, for that matter, does George Stroup, Stanley Hauerwas or (in his earlier work) Gerald Loughlin, all of whom have written extensively on the value of Christian narrative.





## CHAPTER 2

### GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY AND THE QUEST FOR A FEMALE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLIC

Paul Ricoeur largely ignores matters of gender and its relation to philosophy, and yet he leaves pointers for those who, from a feminist perspective, seek to open up the question of gender in the quest for woman's subjectivity and a female symbolic. In this regard, I now consider the contributions of Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen.

#### ***Luce Irigaray On Subjectivity And Sexual Difference***

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Erin White has pointed out the explicitly and implicitly androcentric character of texts, including those of Ricoeur, in relation to narrative identity.<sup>1</sup> Yet Ricoeur also demonstrates the contingent and polysemic nature of the symbol and the potential of hermeneutics, as symbols 'recharge' thought, to advance and enrich the virtuous circle of belief, understanding and subsequent ethical response. In short, symbols, narratives and texts – including religious and liturgical ones – can be read so as to excavate new meanings, at the same time possibly altering our sense of identity and our subsequent actions.

In the case of gender, it follows that symbols can be re-interpreted so as to give rise to non-masculinist thought that will allow for the liberation of a feminine/female identity. The question is, however, how such a female symbolic can be found (or created) within what has historically been an exclusively masculinist paradigm. How can a female symbolic be imagined if, within recorded history, it has never existed? Can a Christian woman ever know her true identity and realise her full personhood when the entire symbolic and narrative of her faith is largely constructed, ordered and interpreted by men and focused around a masculine divine trinity? Indeed, can any man similarly reach his horizon of potential within such a phallogocentric environment?

The notion of a fundamental transformation in the western symbolic in relation to gender and religion that allows for the possibility of a feminine/female symbolic has been posited by Luce Irigaray. Whereas Ricoeur leaves issues of gendered identity largely unexplored, Irigaray, writing contemporaneously, treats such issues as a fundamental starting point for theoretical inquiry<sup>2</sup>. She sees the

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson observes that, in *the Symbolism Of Evil*, (1967) in an otherwise largely androcentric text, Ricoeur does acknowledge the 'very masculine resentment' that links women's dependence on men to Eve's symbolic defilement. This admission, Anderson comments, 'leaves an opening for not only a recognition of women's lack of autonomy, but a challenge to the rational autonomy of the idealized male subject in Western societies'. (1998:218)

<sup>2</sup> Irigaray defines gender as 'not just a question of biology and physiology. It constitutes the irreducible differentiation that occurs *on the inside of the human race*', the unsubstitutable position of the *I* and the *you* and of their means of expression. (Irigaray 1993c:169)

recognition and opening up of sexual difference as a major philosophical project and the paradigm for all other differences, including those in spiritual experience: 'Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through.' (Irigaray 1993a:5) By asserting the fundamental importance of sexual difference, she is not constructing a programme for the change she envisions, but rather aiming to set in motion a process. Her project is to imagine a future grounded in sexual difference, to bring into existence, through critical engagement with the present, a world beyond patriarchy founded on the acknowledgement of and respect for two equal genders. Her philosophy aims to operate in terms of sexual difference, bringing to existence the unthought, the unsymbolised. Her work, largely concerned with the imaginary, with symbol and language, looks at failures within the present symbolic order and posits possibilities for fundamental changes built upon sexual difference and recognition of the female subject. Since women's oppression is founded on sexual difference, it must be resolved through sexual difference; hence the central issue for her is the possibility of advancing an ethics governing the relationship between the sexes. Language, she argues, is central to this process: 'language is not neutral...its rules weigh heavily on the constitution of a female identity and on women's relationships with one another.' (Irigaray 1994:27)

All thought and language are gendered and so there is no neutral thought, whether in science, philosophy or psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> In seeking to articulate conditions that would elevate woman's status within the symbolic, she explores sexual difference, femininity, and language through the lens of French psychoanalytical and philosophical theory and literary criticism, and uncovers the gendered character of western thought, which she criticises as phallogentric and failing to promote female subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> In accepting the materiality that defines woman, Irigaray poses the question as to what would happen if this matter were to gain a voice. Using this approach offers, as Tina Beattie points out, a 'more radical critique of culture and a more challenging analysis of the patriarchal order than many of her Anglo-Saxon contemporaries, particularly in the field of feminist theology.' (1999:24)

In making use here of Irigaray's work, I intend not to privilege feminist theory above the doctrines of Christian faith and worship, but to show that such philosophical and psychoanalytical inquiry can offer transformative possibilities for the religious imaginary which finds expression in our liturgical practices. In her quest for a rearticulation of the present order so as to achieve conditions that would allow women to become subjects in their own right, she is trying to imagine the unimaginable, since we have no experience of a possible alterity in our current masculine imaginary and discourse. Women's identity and means of

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<sup>3</sup> Irigaray illustrates the non-neutrality of scientific language in *Thinking The Difference* 1994 pp.30-35.

<sup>4</sup> French theories of 'sexual difference' draw on linguistics, literary studies, semiotics, philosophy and psychoanalytic theories. They argue, in the words of Rosi Braidotti, that 'an adequate analysis of women's oppression must take into account both language and materialism', which include semiotic and symbolic aspects. (Braidotti 1993:55) A central quest is that of female subjectivity free from gender dualism.

expression still have to be created. Yet Irigaray insists that, even in present western culture, where identity, logic and rationality are symbolically male, a radical transformation of the social imaginary towards the woman as subject is possible. The advent of woman as subject of culture requires a collective transformation of the symbolic built upon recognition of sexual difference, not only in reproduction but also in access to culture: this is, for Irigaray, 'one of the great hopes for the future.' (Irigaray 1993c:vi)

In regarding themselves as formed in God's image, men have excluded women from the sphere of the divine whilst relying on women's resources. Yet for women as well as for men, the task of aspiring towards the divine is fundamental to being: 'God holds no obligations over our needs, except to *become*. No task, no obligation burdens us except that one: become divine.' (Irigaray 1986:10) In order to define their subjectivity in what has been a patriarchal society that excludes women from the divine, women need a female divine:<sup>5</sup> 'It is only if women have their own concepts of the divine that a divine fecundity between the sexes may occur.' (1986:10) Women have historically lost divine representation, leaving them in a state of dereliction 'without a means of designating ourselves, of expressing ourselves, between ourselves.' (1993b:111) Irigaray thus associates notions of the divine with women's struggles for personal and social autonomy: 'we certainly have to incite a return to the *cosmic*, but at the same time asking ourselves why we were stopped as we were becoming *divine*.' (1986:3)

What might be the implications, Irigaray asks, of supposing that women are subjects who can mediate the divine, that the divine horizon could be female? The notion of the female divine horizon and thus the need for a new female symbolic opens up a whole range of possibilities for investigating and re-interpreting the array of traditional Christian symbols and narratives, particularly in relation to the woman priest. The fact of women's priesthood in the Anglican Church must indicate an acceptance that women can indeed mediate the divine; yet so much of traditional symbol and narrative, in both text and ritual, implicitly or explicitly denies, represses or ignores such a female mediation. I shall explore the interplay of symbol and meaning attached to priesthood and to discover ways in which the woman priest can indeed represent the female mediation of the divine. This can be achieved, I argue, not through rejecting our story of faith and our ritual expression of it, but through re-interpreting these through a feminist lens which looks for the lacunae in the present masculinist symbolic order and suggests fresh readings that assume a feminine/female subjectivity.

Beattie argues that one of the main concerns of Irigaray, a Roman Catholic, is to question the spirituality imposed on women as the other by her patriarchal (and Roman Catholic) culture. Hence Irigaray 'mimetically adopts the feminine persona constructed within that narrative in an act of subversive affirmation of the potential of Catholic symbolism for the creation of a culture of sexual difference.' (Beattie 1999:35) Irigaray and Beattie focus on the reinterpretation of Marian symbolism as a possibility for a culture of sexual difference within

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<sup>5</sup> The divine (and the possibility of the female divine) is a central theme of *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, 1993.

Christianity.<sup>6</sup> As an Anglican who has not been extensively exposed to Marian doctrine or devotion, I must leave this line of inquiry to others. However, as an Anglican priest, I argue that the development of a theology of women's priesthood can similarly initiate a culture of sexual difference within the Church and embody the recognition of women's subjectivity and a feminine/female symbolic.

To remedy the exclusion of women from the divine, Irigaray proposes the creation of a powerful female symbolic which would represent the *other* term of sexual difference. In other words, to quote Margaret Whitford, 'The hypothesis she is making is that the projection of a woman divinity could introduce sexual difference into the symbolic' (Whitford 1991a:141) –a shift that would require a realignment of the entire monotheistic socio-religious economy. In order to make way for new possibilities that recognise sexual difference, Irigaray explores the flaws and omissions in the current masculinist symbolic order. From this can come the possibility of a valid subjectivity for women and hence a new form of ethical relationship between women and men, an ethics of sexual difference whereby woman and man 'help one another in their spiritual development, without diminishing the singularity of each one.' (2004:157) Central to this process is religion in the sense of a 'way of accomplishment of the human both as a gathering of self in oneself and as a bond with the universe and the other.' (2003:5) By respecting their differences, women and men together can become co-redeemers of the world, where sexual identity proper to each gender is recognised and cultivated. (2004:93).

In her earliest work in the field of psycho-linguistics, Irigaray looks at differences between women and men in the field of speech, and finds that these are not biologically determined. Rather, identity is assumed in language within the symbolic system of patriarchy, in which only the masculine subject-position is possible, so that women are not self-defined. Her collection of essays, *The Speculum Of The Other Woman*, (1974) has been described by Toril Moi as 'a highly sophisticated feminist deconstruction or critique of patriarchal discourse.' (Moi 1985:129) Here, Irigaray examines texts of Plato, Descartes, Freud and other great thinkers and concludes that all the authors tell 'the story of the same' – a static definition of a central 'truth', carrying the assumption that reality presents a stable form which can be analysed and categorised, often in the form of binary opposites. The identity of a central principle is constructed on its interaction with the 'other', whose identity exists only in reflecting or marking the boundaries of the 'one.'

The central principles, Irigaray argues, tend to bear 'masculine' characteristics defined by the 'feminine' nature of the 'other.' For instance, the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition explores the unconscious and sexual desire only from a masculinist perspective. For Freud, the basic fact of sexual difference originates in the penis. Since women lack such an organ, Freud sees the female as an absence or negation: hence, from this visual perception of deficiency, the

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<sup>6</sup> Mary is something of a controversial figure within feminist theology. She is viewed by some (e.g. Marina Warner in *Alone Of All Her Sex*, 1990) as a stumbling block to spiritual fulfilment, and by others (e.g. Tina Beattie, 1999) as a figure through whom God's immanence is known and who opens up the possibility of women's priesthood.

assumption giving rise to Freud's theory of penis envy. (Moi 1985:133) Freud's oedipal theory not only reveals the origins of patriarchy but also, as Beattie puts it, 'sustains rather than subverts that patriarchal social order.' (1999:24) Woman is 'other', the binary opposite, whose difference generates male identity. She herself has no identity of her own. In critiquing Freud, Irigaray finds that his theory of femininity bears many misogynistic assumptions and traditions. Woman's 'otherness' is repressed and silenced, exiled to a 'blind spot' with no identity.

Irigaray's search for the repressed and ignored within the language of western culture has been strongly influenced by Jacques Lacan,<sup>7</sup> who, through bringing insights from structural linguistics to Freudian analysis, focuses on the importance of the unconscious, and on the human subject as a creation of the use of language. For Freud, meaning is ascribed to anatomical differences of the male and female organs, interpreted by way of presence or absence, whereby both sexes feel incomplete (males experience castration anxiety, females penis envy). Lacan has reread Freud in terms of the symbolic functions of the phallus and of paternity. In developing a theory of sexualisation within the field of language, he has built on Freud's recognition that sexual difference is more cultural than biological, and argues that psychoanalytic theory must be interpreted as literature rather than as science or biology. For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, which itself is the complex means of subject construction. (1975/98:56) He is concerned with how the speaking being experiences sexuality at the level, not of biological sex, but of the psyche. The subject is alienated simply by entering into language, which imposes limits that deny full satisfaction. This 'phallic function' of castration operates for both sexes. Access to the symbolic occasions a split in the subject, in which the unconscious finds expression within the structures of language in the gaps, such as slips of the tongue, dreams and mannerisms.

In his work on the resolution of the Oedipal complex in the process of subjective development, Lacan distances himself from Freud's emphasis on the penis and talks instead of the phallus – primarily what the child perceives that the mother desires. The Oedipal aspiration to be the phallic thing for the mother Lacan calls castration, a stage experienced by children of both sexes. As the symbolic father (representing the requirement for socialisation) intervenes to thwart the child's Oedipal aspirations, the child must accede to castration and the Law of the father. The child's wish to substitute itself for the 'imaginary phallus' that the mother desires is substituted by the 'symbolic phallus', the acceptance of the father's prohibition. The phallus becomes the symbol of a process of distortion. Speaking separates the child from what it wants; a structural feature of language is that (like Chinese whispers) it distorts the original message. The phallus represents what is lost in entering the register of language: the message slips away, and what is desired is out of reach because of the fact of speech. At this point the child can become fully competent as a language speaker, respecting a given set of laws for the use and combination of words. Accession to the order

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<sup>7</sup> Lacan has attracted a mixture of responses from feminist and postfeminist criticism. Beattie, for instance, finds his theory, from a feminist perspective, 'potentially devastating.' (1999:26) Elizabeth Wright provides a defence and discussion in *Lacan And Postfeminism* (2000).

of language is necessary for the subject's capacity to understand the world. Language, the symbolic register, is the agent of castration, or the emptying out of *jouissance* from the body, which introduces the notions of loss and absence into the world.

Socialisation requires the acquisition of a sexual identity as male or female in relation to the phallus. Following the experience of castration, the male's fantasy is to have the phallus whilst the female's fantasy is to be the phallus, the object of desire. In both cases the phallus symbolises absence, the unsatisfied need for the mother's body. Language masks this inexpressible loss and the phallus (symbolising separation from the mother) becomes the primary signifier of the linguistic order, at the same time masking the function of language as a substitute for the mother's body. In Lacan's sexuation formulae, each sex is lacking by reason of entering the symbolic. Object-choice is variable, but there will always have to be some form of 'castration', a requirement of entering into language. The relationship between phallus and biological penis is arbitrary. One can experience sexuality at the level of the psyche and so, with regard to the sexed body, there is a choice: either of the biological sexes can inscribe themselves on the 'other' side.<sup>8</sup> Any speaking being situating itself under the banner 'woman' is grounding itself as 'not-whole in situating itself in the phallic function.' (1975:72) Hence woman, according to Lacan must be written with a bar through the word, since 'there is no such thing as Woman.' (Lacan 1998:72).<sup>9</sup> The bar, wherever placed, indicates woman's non-subjectivity – she is not man.

Lacan recognises that the symbolic order, in its initial operation, is androcentric and that the oedipal process leaves women cultural disadvantaged in terms of participating in the social order. He also associates woman with *jouissance*,<sup>10</sup> a superfluity and excess related to the unconscious and opposed to lack, initiating a fantasy aiming to recover the primal loss. Woman is in a position of *jouissance* that language can signify only in negative terms. Woman does not exist; nothing distinguishes woman as a sexed being except the sexual organ, and so is defined as 'not-whole' (*pas-tout*) with regard to phallic *jouissance*. (Lacan 1998:7) 'Woman' is a signifier but unique in that it cannot signify anything since woman is not-whole. (1998:73) Similarly, Woman's *jouissance*, being 'beyond the phallus', 'doesn't signify anything' (1998:74) and is unknown by woman, except in the sense that it is experienced. (1998:74) Woman's position of the other in language suggests the unknowable Other, beyond 'our

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<sup>8</sup> Beattie, however, points out the importance of anatomy in acquiring sexual identity, and adds: 'However much one emphasises the symbolic function of the phallus, those who possess the biological penis tend to take up a privileged position in relation to the symbolic phallus.' (Beattie 1993:27)

<sup>9</sup> In the original French it is the definite article which is struck through. English translations strike through either the definite article or the term Woman since Lacan is aiming at a 'universal like womanliness or the essence of woman.' (Lacan 1975/98:73n)

<sup>10</sup> Lacan defines *jouissance*, in relation to law, as that which 'serves no purpose.' (1975/98:3) Sexual *jouissance* is phallic and 'not related to the Other as such.' (Lacan 1975/98:9)

good old God': (1998:68) 'the Other as the locus of truth, is the only place...that we can give to the term "divine being", God, to call him by his name.'(1998:45)

Irigaray has built upon Lacan's work on the role of language in the formation of the unconscious and in the acquisition of sexual identity. However, she critiques his emphasis on the primacy of the phallus. It is an empire, she contends, that is

necessitated by the establishment of a society based upon patriarchal *power* in which the natural-maternal power to give birth comes to be seen as the phallic attribute of god-men, and establishes a new order that has to *appear* natural.<sup>11</sup>(Whitford 1991b:96)

She chides the Lacanian lack of attention to sexual difference, which is annulled 'in a complementarity whose division is governed by men.' (Whitford 1991b:98) Lacanian psychoanalysis, she argues, does not acknowledge that there are 'really two sexes, each with its own imaginary and its own order.' (1991:87) Irigaray finds that woman is outside representation, between the lines. (Irigaray 1985:20) Philosophical discourse fails to represent femininity/woman other than as a negative of its own reflections as the 'logic of the same.' Woman is simply man's other, his negative or mirror-image, a mirror to man's masculinity. Subjectivity is, for woman, denied and repressed by patriarchal discourse.

### ***Genders And Genealogies***

Irigaray posits the proposal that a different, non-masculine discourse may be possible. (Irigaray 1985:140) She asks how our body of knowledge and mode of representation would look if it were to also adequately represent women's interests, and whether masculinist accounts can be re-interpreted from other perspectives. Since there is an absence in language of women's own self-representation, she argues that significant shifts are needed in society and culture to transform language, the main attribute of the subject. To this end, Irigaray sets out to imagine a culture with two gendered subjects, each living 'in different worlds based on specific relational identities', (Irigaray 2004:127) and each respecting the differences and diversity of the other. This can only be imagined since, historically and currently, sexual identity and non-identity are constituted by the patriarchal social-symbolic order. Sexual difference is repressed and female desire cannot be recognised, even by women themselves, until women can express their own identity as subjects. A starting point for Irigaray in this quest is the double axis of the genders and their genealogies. Under the rule of patriarchy, the daughter is separated from her mother and other family, and becomes the wife and mother within the genealogy of the husband. Maternal function is restricted to the dimension of individual and collective need, with 'nothing left of maternal female potency to satisfy desire, particularly in its religious dimension.'(Irigaray 1993c:11) The law of patriarchy, which functions on the basis of (symbolic) matricide, censors and represses desire of/for the mother.

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<sup>11</sup> This and the following remarks are from a paper that delivers a scathing attack on Lacanian psychoanalysis. It originally appeared in *Parler N'est Jamais Neutre* (1985) and subsequently was published in English, Whitford 1991.



Irigaray criticises patriarchal tradition for allowing access to the cultural order only via a single, masculine line of filiation. This fails to symbolize the mother-daughter relationship which, in patrilinear societies, is 'subordinated to relations between men.' (Irigaray 1993b:15) Mother-daughter genealogies have been erased in a religion with a purely male genealogy which subsumes the wife/woman's identity; there is no female spiritual genealogy. The exclusively male genealogical system obscures woman's genealogy and the primacy of the maternal, and denies the spiritual charge of the maternal. Psychoanalysis acknowledges the genital drive through which the phallic penis regains from the mother the power to birth and to nourish; yet there is first the bond with the mother through the umbilical cord. What has happened, she asks, to the imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life, the relationship with the placenta, of the first bodily encounter with the mother: 'where are we to find the imaginary and symbolic of life in the womb and the first *corps-a-corps* with the mother? In what darkness, what madness, do they lie abandoned?' (Irigaray 1993c:15) In our culture, the Father, wanting to be the sole creator, denies the mother her generative power and

superimposes upon our ancient world of flesh and blood a universe of language and symbols that has no roots in the flesh and drills a hole through the female womb and through the place of female identity. (1993c:16)

Where there are only male gods, there is no image whereby women can affirm their identity. The double axis of the two genders has been collapsed in patriarchal society into male-sired genealogies; 'Men have taken sole possession of the divine, of identity, and of kinship.' (1993c:v) God, as an idealised projection of masculine identity, has helped man to define his gender and to 'orient his finiteness with reference to infinity.' (1993c:61) He has sought out a male God, created from man's gender. In the hom(m)osexual imaginary, only the male is represented and the feminine/female becomes encoded in terms of male desire, so that it is excluded from representing the human or the divine. Male and female are defined by the male whilst the female is represented by absence, occluded from the economy of signs.

Irigaray observes that we need divinity in order to become free, autonomous and sovereign; and yet Christianity has been dominated by 'the male trinitary God' so that women, who have no God, 'are unable to communicate or commune with one another', and since they are unable to form a relationship with some sexual divine horizon, they are 'unable to share while protecting [their] becoming'. (1993c:62) Woman, for Irigaray, 'has no gender through which she can become.' (1993c:61) The scriptures, Irigaray finds, offer scant resources for female becoming: 'the Old Testament does not tell us of a single happy mother-daughter couple.' (1994:100) And where there is no divine representation of the mother-daughter, women lack the ability to construct a sexed identity. (1993b:21) Moreover, the emphasis in the Christian narrative on the originative power of the father leaves the woman solely as mother, passive receptacle to the patriarchal line, a token of exchange in the male economy of language and desire, a means of reproduction. (Irigaray 1985:16) Women, who have remained 'too childish, too afraid, too passive with respect to ...religious belonging', (2004:152) must now discover their spiritual path.

Irigaray's response to what she sees as phallic domination of maternal power is to call for a rebirth for women, which can take place only when woman is freed from man's archaic projection on to her, and with the advent of an autonomous and positive representation of women's sexuality in culture. (Irigaray 1993c:17) Her vision of such a future privileges mothers and daughters, rather than fathers and sons; Father and Son would remain, but female images would supplement these as an aspirational horizon for women, thus offering, as Ellen Clark-King puts it, 'a goal or path in becoming.' (2004:61) In the absence of maternal genealogies of mother-daughter, the idea of divine women becomes crucial in recovering the buried maternal and to articulating sexual difference. The mother-daughter relation needs also to be conceived as divine, and woman must be able to become divine in and of herself, not just as mother/lover/wife, in order for a notion of divinity for women to develop. Moreover, a language must be found that does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language seeks to do, but which recognizes the corporeal, allows for the symbolic representation of the maternal body, and asserts the genealogy of women: 'Let us try to situate ourselves within that female genealogy so that we can win and hold on to our identity.' (1993c:19)

Irigaray's call for positive female images leads her to examine the value of Mariology. I suggest that, within the Anglican tradition where devotion to Mary is not universal, the woman priest can help to position women within a female genealogy in order to foster women's identity. She is always a daughter and often biologically a mother. But she also represents motherhood in the sense that Irigaray defines it. Irigaray sees the female sex as having no stability of essence, so that it is open to relation with the other, 'whom she does not take into herself, like a whore, but to whom she continually gives birth.' (1991:86) Thus the female sex is one of unceasing birthing, not necessarily of children, but of relations and of creativity.

If this idea of unceasing birthing applies to the female sex, then I suggest that it applies in a particular way to the woman priest. Surely all priests are called to 'give birth' to others in the sense of helping them to reach full personhood in the Body of Christ. Tillich observes that the symbol 'participates in the reality of that for which it stands...[it] grows and dies according to the correlation between that which is symbolised and the person who receive it as a symbol.' (Tillich 1953:265) I suggest that maternal symbolism for God carries a greater resonance when mediated through a women priest who, whether or not she is herself a mother, carries with her all the symbolism attached to the maternal. Taking Irigaray's notion of motherhood, women priests carry a rich symbolism associated with motherhood which can be of value for all women in achieving subjectivity. Moreover, since the priest represents the Church, then the woman priest, in representing women as well as men, is uniquely placed within the symbolic narrative of the faith to promote a culture of sexual difference which will encourage the recognition of women's subjectivity.

Despite her appeal for an incarnational form of language that acknowledges the interdependent relationship between word and flesh, Irigaray has been criticised for her lack of embodied, concrete discourse and abstract use of religious

symbolism.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as I argued in the previous chapter, ritual is the best medium in which to understand religious symbolism. I suggest, therefore, that Irigaray's ideas can be given substance in the context of the woman priest celebrating the Eucharist amidst a worshipping community. Moreover, within the locus of the liturgy of the Eucharist, Irigaray's work on the female divine and on the possibility of women's subjectivity can be applied in helping to develop a theology of women's priesthood within the unfolding narrative of faith lived out by believers individually and collectively.

### ***Becoming***

Language that recognizes the original relationship to the mother offers fertile ground for desire and creativity, as Irigaray demonstrates in *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*. (1993) Here, she sets out her search for such a language for women, based on the premise of sexual difference:

I will never be in a man's place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other – they are irreducible one to the other. (1993a:12)

She asserts that such a language of sexual difference can come about only through a revolution in thought and ethics: 'Everything, beginning with the way in which the subject has always been written in the masculine form, as *man*, even when it is claimed to be universal or neutral.' (1993a:6) Such a transition would involve a change in the economy of desire, that sense of attraction occupying the interval between form and matter which leads to wonder. For Irigaray wonder is a passion that initiates 'a birth into a transcendence, that of the other...still in the world of the senses, still physical and carnal, and already spiritual.' (1993a:82) To achieve this we must be faithful to becoming: 'wonder would be the passion of the encounter between the most material and the most metaphysical, of their possible conception and fecundation one by the other.' (1993a:82) Finding the language and the desire of which they are historically deprived would allow women to gain their identity within the divine economy; for God, Irigaray claims, 'respects the difference between him and her, in cosmic and aesthetic generation and creation.' (1993a:150)

For Irigaray, the pursuit of human becoming to its divine fulfillment is 'the spiritual task most adapted to our age...to search for the way of a human flourishing still to come', (2003:1) a task that links woman with God and with language. The divine horizon is inseparable from one's gendered subjectivity: 'Having a God and becoming one's gender go hand in hand.' (1993c:67) Female subjectivity is possible only where there is love between women and a discourse that can transfigure flesh and blood – a prerequisite also for dialogue between the sexes. To become divine women and men, our great obligation, entails a refusal to 'allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment.' (1993c:68)

In order to advance human becoming, Irigaray proposes the notion of the sensible transcendental, by which the human being can be seen as a locus in which the transcendent finds its presence in the immanent, and the symbolic in

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Beattie 1999:37.

the actual. It points to a divine that is still ahead, described by her as the 'material texture of beauty.' (Irigaray 1993a:32) It is seen in the context of woman's love of self, freed from the constraints of the male imaginary in order to find true identity and symbolic representation. Ellen Armour points out that the sensible transcendent overturns the conventional associations of divinity with transcendence *of* materiality, replacing them with a divine transcendence *in* materiality. (Armour 2004:51) The concept of the sensible transcendent links imaginary and symbolic, language, body and ethics, what Whitford calls the 'flesh made word'. As they begin to develop their own symbolic order and enter into dialogue women become subjects and men become predicates. (Whitford 1991a:47) Since it is about becoming, it is part of a process rather than a static definition; it offers a framework for thinking through issues of identity, without being prescriptive. Mary Keller describes this concept as beginning with 'the sexuate other as the ground that precedes philosophy' (Keller 2003:72) and which grounds ethics in difference. Both part of experience and the ground of experience, it would act as a bridge to and a space for the divine:

This creation would be our opportunity...by means of the opening of a *sensible transcendent* that comes into being through us, of which we *would* be the mediators and bridges...by conjuring [god] up among us, within us, as resurrection and transfiguration of blood, of flesh, through a language and an ethics that is ours. (Irigaray 1993a:129)

If we accept the validity of Irigaray's assertion of the inseparability of gendered subjectivity and the divine horizon, then we must consider its significance in relation to developing a theology of women's priesthood. Any priest, by the nature of their calling, would surely recognize the aspiration within themselves towards the divine; and also the vocation to communicate that aspiration to others. If sexual difference is a fundamental philosophical category, and if gendered subjectivity is a fundamental constituent of becoming, then priesthood itself, in its symbolic role of representing the divine, must recognize, value and celebrate its doubly gendered nature as well as that of the whole Body of Christ.

The woman priest's otherness must not be ignored or exiled to an identity-less 'blind spot.' Rather, the woman priest, in breaking the phallic monopoly in representing the divine, opens up possibilities for non-masculinist discourse and a female symbolic. At the altar her embodied presence and actions and her voice lends the possibility of female subjectivity to all women. Taking Irigaray's notion of the sensible transcendent, she represents the ability of women everywhere to mediate the divine, not by escaping from but by celebrating their embodied and sexuate nature. From this flows the promise of flourishing to all women - and to men also, through the destabilisation of the traditional symbolic of godlikeness, power and domination associated with the masculine/male.

### ***Is Irigaray Essentialist?***

There have been suggestions of biological essentialism<sup>13</sup> - the assumption of an essential nature that transcends culture and socialisation - in Irigaray's approach

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<sup>13</sup> An account of the feminist debate on essentialism, and in particular the position of Irigaray, is given by Naomi Schor, 1994. She defines essentialism within the context of feminism as 'the belief that woman has an essence, than woman can be specified by one

to sexual difference and her project of opening a space where women can speak as women. According to this reading, she is proclaiming a biologically given femininity whereby biology itself constitutes femininity, so that biological sex is causally linked with sexual identity, unmediated by the imaginary. Irigaray contends that 'the language of women reveals itself to be different from that of men', and that relations to oneself, to another and to the world are expressed in various ways by woman and man. (Irigaray 2004:151) Andréé Roy lists qualities that Irigaray gives as characteristic of women (such as relational, spiritually awakened). She warns of a danger of turning these into 'quasi-innate qualities of women' and then enclosing women 'in an essentialist paradigm' (Roy 2003:27) rather than acknowledging differences, including those of class and race.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Judith Poxon suggests that the concept of divinity as an horizon, a model of perfection, suggests a sort of normativity in the process of subjectification that might be rejected by, for instance, lesbians or women of colour. (Poxon 2003:45) She finds that this model does not sufficiently destabilise the logic of the Same, and 'disappoints the hope that feminist theology will imagine a non-exclusionary discursive practice.' (2003:46) Moi concludes that Irigaray's critique of patriarchal thought is undercut by her attempt essentially to define the feminine. (Moi 1985:148) Irigaray, however, refutes such suggestions: 'To affirm that man and woman are really two different subjects does not amount for all that to sending them back to a biological destiny, to a simple natural belonging. Man and woman are *culturally* different.' (Irigaray 1993c:26)

The problem of the universalised gendered subject is addressed by Mary McClintock Fulkerson, who writes of the need to be rid of 'the Cartesian subject and disembodied subjectivity that underlie the constructed subject.' (Fulkerson 1994:6) She maintains that the issue of woman as subject is as yet unresolved in feminist theoretical and theological discourse, which tends to invoke universality in its appeal to 'women's experience.' Since 'women's experience' is a false universal, she argues, then the notion of woman must be non-universalised. According to my reading, Irigaray universalises not woman but rather sexual difference; the way that difference is treated is the origin of differences in culture and tradition. The specific relational identity of each gender is built upon different irreducible givens:

The woman is born of a woman, of someone of her gender, the man is born of someone from another gender than himself; the woman can engender in herself like her mother, the man engenders outside of himself; the woman can nourish with her body; the man nourishes thanks to his work; the woman can engender in herself the masculine and the feminine; the man, in fact, intervenes as man above all in the engendering of the masculine. (Irigaray 2004:27)

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or a number of inborn attributes that define across cultures and throughout history her unchanging being and in the absence of which she ceases to be categorized as a woman.' (1994:59) In short, for an essentialist, the female body remains 'the rock of feminism.' (1994:60)

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Armour explains the historic links between biological essentialism, race and gender (2004:42-53).

For Irigaray, sex is the primary difference, but with this model, difference of any sort, as Keller points out, 'would be respected because difference is the ground of ethics.' (2003:73) In this sense woman is universalised only on the basis of sexual difference, and is open to the variations of cultural and social diversity. As Naomi Schor argues, these issues of difference among as well as within women form the ground on which the impasse between essentialism and anti-essentialism can begin to yield. (Schor 1994:62) The concept of the sensible transcendental does not universalise women, but allows for differences between women and women's multiple identity. All women, whatever their racial, social or cultural background, are capable of mediating the divine. All women priests, whatever their situation, are called to represent both the divine and the Church in the vast range of cultural and liturgical situations in which they find themselves. Irigaray is not assuming a biologically determined femininity, but is rather reflecting on the woman subject from the perspective of the imaginary and the symbolic, where the relationship between sexual identity and anatomy is always fluid and unstable. As Beattie argues, her challenge to patriarchy comes not through a generalised appeal to women's experience 'but through the reclamation and appropriation of cultural symbols, including religious symbols' (Beattie 1999:24), by which she tests and exploits boundaries of the current symbolic order. She exposes the logic of the same and its denial of the right of difference, a necessary step, according to Schor, 'in toppling the universal from his/(her) pedestal.' (Schor 1994:65) Schor claims that Irigaray's best defence against essentialism is 'the defiant plurality of the feminine' (1994: 76), summed in her comment that:

[Woman] does not set herself up as *one*, as a (single) female unit. She is not closed up or around one single truth of essence...she does not oppose a feminine truth to the masculine truth...no stability of essence is proper to her. (1991:86)

The consideration of difference, leading to the creation of a female imaginary and its ethical consequences, is central to Irigaray's work and one that she sees as imposing 'a real conversion in the mode of thinking, of acting.' (Irigaray 2003:8) Her work is located, however, within the symbolic, with a view to changing the structure of language. On her focus in the realm of the symbolic, Whitford comments: 'the possible articulation of material and symbolic is not worked out by Irigaray *except at the junction of the two in language and in the bodies of women.*' (Whitford 1991a:21) Similarly, Armour comments that Irigaray's evocations of diversity remain largely abstract. (Armour 2004:44) With regard to religion, Beattie comments that Irigaray is trapped in the disembodied discourse that she seeks to escape:

Her religious symbolism lacks sacramentality and therefore corporeality, because it is abstracted from its rightful place in the creative aporia between word and flesh where liturgical performance and worship give bodily expression to the language of faith. (Beattie 1999:37)

Irigaray's arguments may lack embodiment in the concrete, and yet, in re-centring women's experience, she provides an opening, as Roy puts it, for

constituting a new feminist theology and founding a female spirituality.<sup>15</sup> (Roy 2003:22) Within the philosophy of religion, sexual difference must now be treated seriously, and can be taken as a basis for transforming the religious imaginary in terms of uncovering what Anderson calls the 'repressed discourse of maternal desire in religious myths'. (Anderson 1998:105) This will lead to a refiguration of belief that in practice moves away from exclusivity in religion. Acknowledgement of sexual difference, an embodied concept, necessitates a concretisation of a philosophy of religion. As Armour puts it, religion is 'a cultural force and a communal practice, a matter not just of doctrine but of ritual.' (Armour 2004:52) Hence, I suggest, the concept of sexual difference opens up transformative possibilities for looking at the role of the priesthood and in particular the significance and potential contribution of the woman priest. As Whitford asserts, it is important to engage with Irigaray 'in order to go beyond her.' (Whitford 1991a:6)

### ***Grace Jantzen And The Divine Ideal***

Grace Jantzen is among those who have drawn extensively on Irigaray's work, and for whom difference is essential for epistemology, with gender difference being paradigmatic. (Jantzen 2004:29) Acknowledging Irigaray's work on opening up new horizons of the imminent divine that celebrate rather than repress sexual difference, she contends that 'woman's experience offers transformative suggestions for the religious imaginary and the development of the woman subject.' (Jantzen 1998c:61) Irigaray's influence is evident in Jantzen's criticism of traditional Christianity and in her treatment of the symbolic. Both writers find that Christianity has focused on the transcendent to the detriment of the material here and now. Both contend that the current notion of a divine ideal is masculinist and resistant to difference. Both seek an ethic based on difference that will lead to new ways of considering religion, identity and social and environmental justice. But for these to materialize, Jantzen asserts, 'it is necessary to be in touch with emotion, bodiliness and sexuality, in short that which psychoanalytic theory has labeled the feminine.' (2004:34)

Jantzen proposes a pantheist theology in which the old dualism of spirit/matter, mind/body is demolished and the divine is identified with the embodied world. In *Becoming Divine*, (1998) (a title drawn from Irigaray) Jantzen continues Irigaray's search for a divine that is mediated within and between people, women as well as men, and that allows all people, including women, to flourish. She critiques Anglo-American philosophy for its preoccupation with the question of the existence of God and concentrates instead on the aspiration of humans to reach for the divine within themselves.<sup>16</sup> To this end, she exposes the inability

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<sup>15</sup> Irigaray's arguments are perhaps more fully concretised in the social and political fields. See, for instance, her comments on sexual difference vis a vis the Universal Declaration Of Human Rights, where she concludes that 'sexual difference, which constitutes the most basic human reality, is treated like an almost non-existent problem.' (Irigaray 1994:ix)

<sup>16</sup> Beattie offers a succinct summary of the differences between Anglo-American and French philosophies in 'Redeeming Mary: the Potential Of Marian symbolism For Feminist Philosophy Of Religion' (2004:107-122) She mentions Jantzen's critique of

of traditional philosophy to open itself to sexual difference and to the importance of the phenomena of birth, maternity and materiality. In investigating continental thought on sexual difference and gender in religion, she observes that, in the continental view, the traditional divine ideal serves as an expression of masculinist aspiration:

any understanding of religion and the concept of God must take seriously the extent to which conceptualizations of the divine are male projections serving the interests of repression of desires and the mastery of (m)others. (2004:33)

The historical masculinist bias in the exploration of selfhood, whether in relation to ourselves or when used as an analogue for God, has rarely shown sufficient regard to gender or embodiment. This is despite the fact that the reciprocal relationship between the understanding of human selfhood and our concept of the divine is intimately related to our gendered, embodied subjectivities. Rather, any such exploration has taken for granted a masculine selfhood, shaped largely by a male-dominated imaginary, focused on death, with a corresponding interest in other worlds and some form of afterlife. With this comes a lack of focus on the needs of the embodied, material world.

As with Irigaray, Janzen seeks a deconstruction of traditional structures of thought in order to reveal their unacknowledged assumptions, so that new possibilities and alternative ways of thinking can be developed. She cites evidence from Freud and from the development of psychoanalysis to show the conceptual connection between women and death, stemming from a young child's experience of separation from the mother and their entry into a phallogocentric society. Death thus becomes associated with women's bodies, whilst the symbolic that links death, sex and the female silences women and ignores or suppresses the significance of birth. (Janzen 2004:16) She observes that western philosophy's concern with violence, sacrifice and death – a male concern evident throughout recorded history - is built upon mortality as a fundamental philosophical category, and characterized by a 'hostility to the body and determination to master it and the material world of which it is a part.' (1998b:106)<sup>17</sup> Janzen links such an attitude with a longing to escape the constraints of this world, and particularly the gendered body, in preparation for the next world. A concomitant feature of necrophilia is an abhorrence or denial of death, an evasion that is 'a symptom of obsession, a preoccupation with death, that must be repressed at all costs.' (1998c:130)

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the lack of attention given in the Anglo-American academy to birth, maternity and materiality, observing that it is necessary to investigate why particular patterns of belief have emerged within the tradition of Western religious thought, and 'how they have been shaped by the politics of power and gender.' (2004:109)

<sup>17</sup> Among her illustrations of dread of and fascination with death are the interest in war and the use of military metaphors in language; and the denial/rejection of death in modern western culture. (Janzen 1998b:102)

Janzen widens the term necrophilia from its psychoanalytic roots to signify 'a cultural fascination and obsession with death and violence.' (2004:5) This is largely a male preoccupation which has become a cultural phenomenon since 'it was predominantly man who structured the symbolic'. (2004:16)



From a feminist perspective, she suggests that this preoccupation with death and efforts to master it are symptomatic of the 'deep misogyny of western culture, fear, dread and fascination with the maternal body.' (1998b:108) Hence she sets out her project to construct a feminist philosophy of religion built 'on a feminist religious symbolic and premised upon the possibility of women subjects, albeit discursively formed.' (1998:2)<sup>18</sup> Feminist thought, she argues, addresses the moulding of consciousness and unconsciousness by 'the material conditions and the ideological constructs of the historical and symbolic contexts in which we are embodied and embedded.' (1998c:31) Since God and language are widely acknowledged as projections or constructions of masculinity, then women's subjectivity develops reciprocally with the formation of a feminist symbolic. A concept of God derived from the lives of women, however diverse, would not, she feels, bear much resemblance to the 'good old God' of Christendom. (1998c:108)

### ***Nativity And The Transformation Of The Religious Imaginary***

In seeking a reversal of the imaginary of death inherent in masculinist structures of thought, she concludes that we must take account of ourselves as natal as much as mortals. (1998b:108) She asks what would happen if we were to start not with death but instead with birth, and 'with the hope and possibility of wonder implicit in it' (1998c:2) – that is, if we were to treat natality as a foundational concept, and afford it the same seriousness as mortality and as striving for another world.<sup>19</sup> A symbolic of natality, presently unacknowledged and repressed, could be an important ingredient of the development of a feminist symbolic. The notion of birth rather than death as a starting point, Jantzen argues, destabilizes the masculinist necrophilic imaginary. Religion should provide us not with the necrophilic concept of an escape from mortality but rather an idea – an horizon - of the wholeness to which we aspire. Since God is the horizon for our becoming, then becoming fully human is closely associated with the aspiration to become divine. (1998c:12)

Jantzen's project of creating a female symbolic, like that of Irigaray, involves transforming the religious imaginary, a task that entails entering an entirely new sphere of thought. For both writers, such a transformation is necessary in order to break the male monopoly on the divine. Yet, whereas Irigaray envisions this process through the concept of a female divine and the sensible transcendental, Jantzen proposes a concept of natality, rooted in the maternal, the body and the material. To destabilize the imaginary of death in order to open up new

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<sup>18</sup> The extent to which philosophy of religion continues to exclude and devalue women and the feminine/female is discussed by Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack in the introduction to *Feminist Philosophy Of Religion* (2004) pp.xiii-xv.

<sup>19</sup> In developing a concept of natality, Jantzen acknowledges the work of Hannah Arendt, a pupil of Heidegger who taught that natality was a key category of thought even more central to our existence than death. (Jantzen 1998b:129) Jantzen has developed Arendt's original work and expanded it, as she says, into a 'deliberate development of a feminist symbolic.' (1998b:109) Appropriating Arendt's work and taking it in directions that Arendt May not have approved of, Jantzen aims to develop Arendt's thoughts 'for the transformation of the imaginary.' (1998b:145)

possibilities for a transformation not dominated by the masculine/male necessitates imagining the body outside the traditional binary oppositions of mind/body, sacred/profane and so on. A shift towards natality would, according to Jantzen, have an enormous impact on aspects of the philosophy of religion. (1998c:146)<sup>20</sup> Birth is the basis for everyone's existence; it is always materially embodied, gendered, and connected with others and with history. There can be no disembodied natality; so the imaginary of natality must always be rooted in the physical and material. (1998c:145) Whereas, within a necrophilic imaginary, gender ceases to matter with death, for embodied natals 'gender is inescapable and of great importance.' (2004:37) The concept of natality leads not out of this world but towards this world and other people – hence a connectedness which differs from misogyny and which is the basis for ethical responsiveness, for instance in the spheres of social justice and environmental stewardship.

Jantzen's concern for the material and embodied leads her to call for a shift in the philosophy of religion away from intellectual justification and towards material justice in the present world, including sexual equality. The focus on natality, she contends, does not

allow for the gender distortion whereby men are kept from being in touch with their bodies and emotions, while women are treated as sex objects and kept from exercising their rational capacities. Natality as a conceptual category requires a positive attitude to bodies and materiality, to the flourishing of this world in all its physical richness. (Jantzen 2004:37)

Allowing all people to flourish would include giving a voice to women: 'the possibility of women learning to speak as women is in reciprocal relation to becoming (woman) subjects.' (Jantzen 1998c:147) Religious and philosophical text must be subject to a 'double reading' that searches for what has been left out by the imaginary of necrophilia and its concomitant misogyny, and reveals that of natality. As with Irigaray, Jantzen sees language as the means by which women will be able to achieve subjectivity through entering into the symbolic. (1998c:170) A feminist imaginary would intervene to resist and challenge the idea of the phallus as universal signifier, thus dislodging it from its 'self-appointed missionary position.' (1998c:194) Such a disruption of the hegemony of the phallus as the dominant masculinist symbolic would open up divine horizons by which both women and men can flourish. In short, Jantzen urges a transformation in the religious symbolic focused on natality that would enable natals, both women and men, to become subjects. This cannot be done by discourse alone. Human flourishing requires extensive changes in material as well as discursive conditions, in actions as well as in thought.

Unlike Irigaray, Jantzen does not expand on any particular religious symbols in her promotion of natality in transforming the religious symbolic. I believe, however, that the concept of natality, in conjunction with that of the female divine

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<sup>20</sup> Its impact is acknowledged by others. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, for instance, maintain that 'to introduce the issue of 'birth' into the discussion of the body in religion is to *transform* that discussion and bring about a reconfiguration of traditional religious symbolics.' (1998:125)

horizon, has a significant bearing on our understanding of women's priesthood in the context of the liturgy. I have already borrowed George Stroup's notion of the 'collision' between the community's tradition and continuing revelation that informs Christian identity, and have suggested how the woman priest causes such a collision in inviting fresh interpretations of traditional narratives and symbols, and possibly also a transformative response. I shall make use of the concepts of the female divine horizon and natality to investigate the 'collision' - in my view, a liberating and fruitful one - that occurs between the woman priest and the religious symbol and narrative within the context of the Eucharist. I shall draw on Jantzen's concept of natality to argue that the redemptive process involves being divinely guided in righting broken relationships, including those of gender, in the concrete world. This must not be simply a case of abstract intellectual discourse but a practical move toward justice in human relationships, not least in the Church that purports to reflect the divine triune interrelationship. Where human relationships echo the divine, then the voices of all, including those as yet without a voice, must be heard into speech. Moreover, as Irigaray speaks of the redemptive potential of sexual difference, where sexual identity is allowed to flourish, I argue that a priesthood of two equal genders that recognises and respects sexual difference is more likely to be a redemptive priesthood that allows and encourages all people to achieve their full subjectivity as children of God.

With the aim of progressing a theology of women's priesthood in the context of the Eucharist, I shall look at some depth in subsequent chapters at the relationship between the notion of natality, our understanding of the identity of the divine and of ourselves, and the potential development of a female religious imaginary. Clark-King notes that, although Jantzen clearly intends her idea of the divine horizon (and, I presume, of natality) to help all women to flourish, she is informed more by the academic community than by that of the world of the ordinary church community.<sup>21</sup> As a practising woman priest, I hope to earth Jantzen's ideas within the context of the Eucharist celebrated with and among believers in the Anglican community. I shall consider the concepts of natality in relation to the symbolism of sacrifice in the eucharistic tradition, and examine how the woman priest, for example by offering a 'double reading' of text and liturgy, may destabilize some traditional assumptions and beliefs. I shall also look at women's priesthood in light of the call to justice, particularly vis a vis the environment; and at the idea of flourishing in relationship to various interpretations of sacrifice and salvation.

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<sup>21</sup> Clark-King examines Jantzen's ideas in a study of the beliefs and practices of women in four churches in the north of England. (Clark-King 2004)



## CHAPTER 3

### IMAGO DEI – THE RECEIVED WISDOM OF CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

*‘Through him you have created all things from the beginning, and formed us in your own image’*

I start by taking the above section of Eucharistic Prayer A to explore the notion of *imago Dei*, a biblical affirmation that has become a foundational theme in the Christian narrative. I draw a brief sketch of historical analyses of the term, to show how it has been subject over time to a mimetic interpretive process that has brought out new meanings. These in turn indicate a range of implications for doctrine, human agency and behaviour.

#### ***Acclamation Of The Creator God In The Eucharistic Prayer***

In preparation for Holy Communion, the president gives thanks to God over the bread and wine by reciting the Eucharistic Prayer. This is one of the elements of the liturgy that has been continuous through the Church’s history and which forms what Gregory Dix calls ‘the absolutely invariable nucleus of every Eucharistic rite known to us throughout antiquity from the Euphrates to Gaul.’ (Dix 1982:48) It is in this prayer, Dix asserts, that the whole meaning of the rite is stated. The text of the prayer has developed over time in terms of content and sequence, although the meaning which the prayer seeks to state has remained largely intact. (1982:157) From the earliest recorded Eucharistic Prayers of Rome, Egypt and Syria onwards, acknowledgement is given to God who made all things.<sup>1</sup> This acknowledgement has been echoed in the Book Of Common Prayer and, latterly, in the text of Common Worship Prayer A (in fact seven of the eight alternative Eucharistic Prayers specifically recognise God as creator).

This part of the prayer arcs back to the very beginning of existence, recalling that the God who is now worshipped in the liturgy is the same God who created the universe.<sup>2</sup> Everything that exists, and all creatures that live and breathe, take their existence from the creator who has formed the universe, breathed life into it and who continues through time to sustain all that has being. God has brought into being a cosmos of infinite order, complexity and particularity. Even one stone, snowflake or air current is not precisely like any other; each individual item is bestowed with distinguishing characteristics. As for living creatures, the work of the creator continues in them in the sustaining of life through the process of procreation. With each succeeding generation new life is brought forth that is unique and distinctive in its own identity, experience and potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Dix gives some of the text of the prayers from the liturgies of Hippolytus (Rome), Sarapion (Egypt) and SS. Addai and Mari and S. James (Syria) (Dix 1982:157-196)

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Stevenson, in his guide to the liturgy of the Eucharist, notes that Prayers A and B echo the Eucharistic Prayer of the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus in their emphasis on the narrative of creation and redemption. (Stevenson 2002:144)

Prayer A (along with Prayers F and G) specifically recalls the creation of humankind. The distinctiveness and potential of the created order culminates in human beings, all of whom, according to the Eucharistic Prayer and the Genesis story to which it alludes, are made in the image of God:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'...

So God created humankind in his image;  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them (Gen 1:26b; 27).

Christian tradition has typically understood these verses as a key biblical affirmation that bears upon the understanding of human life. J. Philip Newell calls this verse in Genesis 'the foundation text of our scriptural inheritance'. (Newell 2000:xi) To be made in God's image – taken usually to mean one's moral, spiritual and intellectual nature - is seen as fundamental, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, to one's self-understanding. The notion of humankind in *imago Dei* is the grounding narrative on which the symbolic identity of the Church is constructed and bound, and through which the liturgy informs the identity and experience of the individual and community. The narrative of priest and congregation, re-membered through the symbol and story of the liturgy, rests on the assumption of our creation in *imago Dei*, a notion continually alive to unfolding interpretations and insights and therefore to the virtuous circle of belief and understanding.

### ***God-talk And Human Identity***

As creatures of God we want to imagine and express our understanding of our creator. Although we know that the nature of God entirely surpasses the limits of human imagination, we inevitably attempt to articulate something about the nature of the divine. As Sarah Coakley points out, 'God is by definition ungraspable, and towards God the dependent creatures yearns inchoately, with "the restless heart" of quasi-erotic unfulfilment'. (Coakley 2002:56) The Judaeo-Christian tradition understands God as utterly holy and transcendent, the creator, redeemer and sustainer of the cosmos, who is nevertheless also immanently present in a way which cannot be fully described or comprehended. No human construct can adequately portray or reflect the nature of God. We can only be led by our imagination, which has been nourished by our experience:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are my ways higher than your ways  
And my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa 55:8-9).

Despite the ineffable nature of God, human perception and imagination are harnessed in order to catch glimpses of the numinous through divine self-revelation. Such revelation does not do away with the mystery, but strengthens our belief, as it did for Moses who asked to see God's glory and was allowed a fleeting glimpse of God's back passing by (Exod 33:18-23). Inevitably, as with Moses and his vision of God's back, we must picture the divine in human terms, since this is the sphere and limit of our human experience. Correspondingly,

since we are created in the divine image, we know that something of the nature of humanity can be related to the nature of the divine. For Christians, this is most evident and fully expressed in God's salvific revelation to the world in the Incarnation, where the transcendent, omnipresent God relates to us through the person of Jesus of Nazareth at a particular time and in a particular context. The identity of God is unique and wholly distinct, yet it is in some way echoed by that of human selfhood. The interchangeability of terms used for divine and human selfhood is, according to Vernon White, 'a helpful reminder of how closely the divine-human analogy can operate'. (White 2002:21)

The Genesis story reveals that God imparts selfhood – that strand of identity individual to each human being that distinguishes us from others and from other creatures. Each individual whom God creates is of a particular race, age, social background and gender.<sup>3</sup> Each bears a particular, embodied personal reality, or selfhood.<sup>4</sup> Each body is unique and precious, a 'sacred text within the larger text of creation', as Newell puts it. (Newell 2000:xv) Our gendered being and function, our sexuality and way of knowing, are bestowed by the creator who made all things and declared them all to be very good (Gen 1:31). As Colin Gunton comments, 'To be a person is to be made in the image of God: that is the heart of the matter'. (Gunton 1991:47) Moreover, to be in the divine image is not simply a characteristic of our humanity: it is, in the words of Newell, 'the essence of our being'. (Newell 2000:xi) Our human, gendered particularity and distinctiveness are in the divine image - our bodies and minds, the feminine and masculine in all of us, and females as well as males. Each person comes to know something of God through their particular, individual, embodied existence. White puts it thus: 'we shall only know God in the human self, and we shall only know the human self in God'. (White 2002:46) Since we are material beings living in the created world, we must come to know and understand something of God through our embodied selves – our bodily schemata, our perceptions, our values, our experiences and so on. The way in which we envision God – how we see God with our mind's eye – is necessarily bounded by how we know and experience our embodied selves. Thus selfhood, as Catherine Keller writes, 'is so much a response to what we deify...that our metaphors of deity reveal the images of our own genesis'. (Keller 1986:38) )

Even with an awareness of the divine mystery beyond, there is a risk of restricting the divine to the limited human resources for imagination. Paul Ricoeur comments that:

When the theologians of the sacerdotal school elaborated the doctrine of man that is summarized in the startling expression of the first chapter of Genesis – 'Let us make man in our image and likeness' – they certainly did not master at once all its implicit wealth of meaning. (Ricoeur 1960:110)

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<sup>3</sup> These categories are not separate and discreet but interact with one another. Elaine Graham writes that 'the dynamics of race and class, and the manner in which they intersect with gender relations, informs much of the critical study of gender' (Graham 1996:78).

<sup>4</sup> Vernon White defines selfhood as 'the individuated and reflexive term of identity' which belongs uniquely to each person. (White 2002:45) It is this definition which I am using here.

In trying to grasp the ungraspable, there has always been a tendency to limit the nature of God to the human capacity to understand it. As with Moses, God-talk tends to employ anthropological terms, in language constrained by the reach of human consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The idea of a personal God – one who loves, speaks, judges, creates, destroys and so on – has been central to the history of the Jewish and Christian religions, and yet with it comes the liability of creating an idol in the image of humankind which fails to transcend the human conception of ultimate reality. There has always been a tension between imaging God as so transcendent as to seem a nullity, or so personal as to seem a mere superhuman being. The situation is further problematised by commentators' tendency to read back into their notion of God's image culturally contextualised meanings and interpretations. This propensity is largely prompted by the lack of biblical references. J. Richard Middleton, in an essay on interpreting the *imago Dei* in context, observes that the tendency is exacerbated by a correlative lack of attention to the immediate context of Genesis 1:26-27 in determining their meaning: 'It is not unusual for interpreters explicitly to affirm, contrary to standard hermeneutical practice, that here context does not clarify meaning'. (Middleton 1994:9) This has resulted, according to Middleton, in interpreters turning to extra-biblical, usually philosophical, sources in order find meaning in terms of 'a metaphysical analogy or similarity between the human soul and the being of God, in categories not likely to have occurred to the author of Genesis' (1994:10). In support of his argument, Middleton cites, among others, Old Testament scholar Norman Snaith:

Many 'orthodox' theologians through the centuries have lifted the phrase 'the image of God' (*Imago Dei*) right out of its context, and, like Humpty-Dumpty, they have made the word mean just what they choose it to mean. (Snaith 1974-5:24)

Despite its being understood as such a key theme, with an enormous scholarly literature in historical, biblical and systematic theological studies, there is a paucity of further biblical references. Two others occur in Genesis (5:1; 9:6), and two in the extracanonical/deuterocanonical books (Wis 2:23; Ecc 17:3). In the New Testament there is mention in the epistles of humans in God's image (Jam 3:9; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10) and specifically of man (not woman) in God's image (1 Cor 11:7). Lack of scriptural sources may explain, at least in part, the manifold and diverse interpretations made down the ages by theologians, who have indicated a variety of implications for doctrine and practice. In general, the term *imago Dei* has been understood to express the unique relationship between God and humanity, whose true personhood is linked inseparably with knowledge of God. (Newell 2000:7)

For the Church Fathers, reason was seen as the main characteristic which humans share with God. Irenaeus, influenced by classical Greek philosophy, linked the theme of the image of God to humans' capacity for reason and will, which remain despite the Fall, although rationality is somehow altered. (Grenz

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Armstrong notes that J, the earlier author of Genesis and Exodus who wrote in Judah, tended to use anthropomorphic language about God, such as his epiphany in human form to Abraham. E, however, avoids such anthropomorphism, which the Israelites would have found shocking. (Armstrong 1993:19-23)



2001:145) Irenaeus made a distinction between the terms image and likeness: the post-lapsarian person retains the former but loses the latter, 'possessing indeed the image in his formation, but not receiving the similitude through the spirit'.<sup>6</sup> Augustine argued that reason and will form the primary structural aspect of the soul, the seat of *imago* in humans, who are created in the image and likeness of God. (Klassen 2004:2) He describes a trinitarian structure in *imago Dei*, reflecting spirit, self-consciousness and love in the human soul and memory, intelligence and will in the psyche. The image of God, for Augustine, orients the person to God in invocation, knowledge and love:

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his won sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you. Grant me, Lord, to know and understand whether a man is first to pray to you for help or to praise you, and whether he must know you before he can call you to his aid. (Augustine, Confessions I, 1, 1)<sup>7</sup>

Thus the soul images God, returns to God and is united with God through this process of self-reflection. Charles Taylor, in reviewing this concept, comments that Augustine was concerned to show that 'God is to be found not just in the world but also and more importantly in the very foundations of the person...in the intimacy of self-presence'.(Taylor 1989:134) For Thomas Aquinas, like Augustine, the image of God is to be found in all post-lapsarian people, believers or not (although in non-believers the image is dimmed). He holds that there is a natural aptitude, through reason, for understanding and loving God, which is common to all. (Hoekema 1994:37-38)

Martin Luther initiated a search for an alternative to the medieval view of the *imago Dei* as a structure of human nature found in the intellectual faculty of the soul. He taught that the image and similitude are lost through sin so that everything is marred 'to the extent that all creatures and the things which were good at first later on became harmful'.<sup>8</sup> The lost image, however, can be restored through the Word and the Holy Spirit. Through faith a Christian can imitate the model of Christ as the form of God: 'For this faith is his life, justification, and salvation, preserving his person itself and making it pleasing to God'. (Wace and Buchheim 1846:281) Although good works are not in themselves the path to divine acceptance, a Christian should be a servant of others in imitation of Christ. John Calvin, using the metaphor of a mirror for the divine image, taught that all creation reflects the divine glory, but that humans have special responsibility in mirroring God; the divine glory can best be seen in

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<sup>6</sup> *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 in *The Ante-Nicene Father* 1:532, quoted in Grenz, Stanley (2001) *The Social God And The Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology On The Imago Dei* London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>7</sup> St Augustine *Confessions*, translated by RS Pine-Coffin (1961) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd p.21.

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures On Genesis* 1:90 cited in Grenz 2001:164.

humankind. (Grenz 2001:166) But the image is tarnished by sin. Any gifts and abilities retained by humankind after the Fall, including reason and will, are distorted and perverted:

in consequence of the corruption of nature, all our faculties are so vitiated and corrupted, that a perpetual disorder and excess is apparent in all our actions...all human desires are evil, and we charge them with sin not in as far as they are natural, but because they are inordinate, and inordinate because nothing pure and upright can proceed from a corrupt and polluted nature.<sup>9</sup>

The dominant view of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine, looking to the original righteousness and moral perfection that pertained in pre-lapsarian humankind, recognises both a broader and a narrower view of *imago Dei*. In the narrower sense, the term stands for knowledge, righteousness and true holiness, all wholly lost at the Fall. In the wider sense it embraces human intellectual capacity, natural affections and moral freedom.

Eastern Orthodoxy, however, takes a less severe view on the consequences of the Fall. Bishop Kallistos Ware comments that: 'The Orthodox picture of fallen humanity is far less sombre than the Augustinian or Calvinist view'. (Ware 1963:229) He explains that this tradition holds a less exalted view of pre-lapsarian humankind, and that the Fall did not deprive humans entirely of God's grace. *Imago* is thus never wholly lost by sinfulness: each person is still an icon of God, and so even the most sinful is infinitely precious in God's sight. As for Roman Catholicism, the International Theological Commission, summing up Reformation controversies, notes that 'the Reformers insisted that the image of God was corrupted by sin, whereas Catholic theologians view sin as a wounding of the image of God in man'. (ITC 2002:4) The notion of human sinfulness and (in the aspiration towards godliness) the avoidance of sin links the interpretation of *imago Dei* with ethical responsibility and accountability. Christianity understands each person as a moral agent with an intrinsic dignity independent of their utility or function, having an obligation to protect the dignity of other people and the wellbeing of creation. In this way, humans can co-operate with God in order that God's purposes can be actualised. It is in this sense that the systematic theologian Anthony Hoekema speaks of image as a verb: 'we are to *image* God by the way we live, and the heart of the image of God is love for God and for others'. (Hoekema 1994:52)

### ***Relationality In Imago Dei***

Humankind's ability to be addressed by and to respond to God's Word has been explored by Karl Barth with reference to the image of God in terms of the human capacity for relationship. Barth rejected the idea of the image of God being found in human intellect or reason. For him, the essence of the image of God lies in the I-thou confrontation as indicated in the biblical reference to the creation of both male and female (Gen 1:27) and which he extends to the relationship between humans and God and between people. Human capacity

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<sup>9</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion III.3.12, trans. Beveridge, Henry.  
<http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes/index.html>  
(accessed 27.11.06).

for relationship reflects the confrontational relationship between God and humankind: each person is created as 'a thou that can be addressed by God but also an I responsible to God'. (Barth 1960:76-77) The activity of men and women conceiving and bearing children is 'the sign of the genuine creaturely confrontation in open differentiation and joyful relationship which is the image and likeness of the divine form of life'. (1958:191) This image and likeness is not lost in the Fall, but 'remains even in face of the total contradiction between it and the being of man'. (1958:190) For Barth *imago Dei* is an analogy of relation rather than being. (Hoekema 1994:49-50) It is the human ability to maintain relationship that causes human beings to be like God. The relational character of *imago Dei* hence forms the basis for considerations of human freedom and responsibility. Relationship with God is based on *analogia fidei*, God-given faith that allows humans to understand God. This defines the identity of human beings and is the ground of the relationship with others and with creation.

For John Zizioulas, writing from an Orthodox perspective, the relationality expressed in the triune God models the way the Church must conform to the image of God. Being in *imago Dei* is fundamentally an event of communion, a way of relationship with God and with creation. For the Church to present such a way of existence, 'she must herself be an image of the way in which God exists.' (Zizioulas 1993:15) Imaging the trinitarian life of God must entail reaching out to all cultures to transcend those divisions, natural and social, that promote disintegration and fragmentation. (1993:254) If the divine nature is essentially relational, and if the *telos* of the Body of Christ is to model on earth the qualities of that relationship between the three persons of the Trinity and between God and creation, then it is important to articulate those divine qualities to which humans aspire, and also to pay attention to any differences in the way those qualities impact on or reflect sexuate human nature.

That humans beings uniquely can relate to God, and are called to be like God, is reflected in Jesus' command: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mat 5:48) Through the narrative of faith the Christian vocation is to follow and imitate the one who was sent by God. In our own time, the centrality of the notion of relationality is evident in The International Theological Commission's description of the Church's response to Christ:

to be created in the *imago Dei* is only fully revealed to us in the *imago Christi*. In sum, we find the total receptivity to the Father which should characterise our relations with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and the mercy and love for others which Christ, as the image of the Father, displays for us. (ITC 2002:12)

The triune nature of God and its significance for human relations in *imago Dei* has, according to many modern writers, been neglected until relatively recently. Classical theologian Colin Gunton remarks that the theology of the Church 'has never seriously and consistently been rooted in a conception of the being of God as triune' and that there has been 'a failure to give due place as a matter of general practice to trinitarian theology.' (Gunton 1989:48-9) The true trinitarian framework for worship and life has, Gunton believes, been lacking in the western church, with the Trinity regarded as an abstract mathematical formula rather than as a code for living well. The paucity of trinitarian theology in the western Church, certainly from the Age of Reason onwards, can be deduced

from the entry entitled 'The Doctrine Of The Trinity' in the *New Dictionary Of Christian Theology*. The entry covers the first few centuries of the Church before moving (after a brief nod to Calvin) to the living Reformed theologian, Jurgen Moltmann.<sup>10</sup>

Moltmann, levelling criticism at Catholics and Protestants alike, comments that 'the doctrine of the Trinity hardly occurs at all in modern apologetic writings which aim to bring the Christian faith home to the modern world again'. (Moltmann 1993:1) His work, *The Trinity And The Kingdom Of God* (1980), was influenced by the emphasis of the Cappadocian Fathers and Orthodox theology on the relationality of the three co-equal persons of the Godhead, and was instrumental in the modern advocacy of a social understanding of the Trinity. Interest in the social model, according to Stanley Grenz, has led to 'the coalescing of theology with the widely accepted philosophical conclusion that the "person" has more to do with relationality than substantiality'. (Grenz 2001:4) In this interpretation, the triunity of God is intimately involved in human experience, including suffering, and the individual is viewed not in isolation but in terms of communion and community. The Trinity as a paradigm for Christian community has greatly informed theologians concerned with its pastoral and socio-political implications, including those in the field of liberation theology and Christian feminists. Both of these movements are attracted to the triune symbol as a model for human community since it can be interpreted as the basis for liberated human relationship and a critique of patterns of unjust domination.

This brief historical sketch indicates the range of different interpretations to which the term *imago Dei* has been subject, together with various doctrinal and ethical implications that have been drawn from these interpretations. As a key symbol in the Christian narrative, *imago Dei* has carried polyvalent connotations in expressing the realm of the sacred and humankind's relationship to it. Over the years, succeeding reflections on the meaning of *imago Dei* have evoked creative interpretations that have attempted to avoid presuppositions that entrap the interpreter into what Ricoeur has called the 'pseudo-knowing of dogmatic mythology' and enabled access to new richness of meaning. (Ricoeur 1974:299-300) Hence, the meaning which the symbol offers can be heard again as a primordial sign of the sacred and the virtuous circle of believing and understanding continues. Thus I now turn to consider feminist interpretations of *imago Dei* in relation to the feminine/female, and how these interpretations bear upon a theology of women's priesthood.

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<sup>10</sup> Mackay, James (1983) 581-589.



## CHAPTER 4

### IMAGO DEI – SOME FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

***‘Through him you have created all things from the beginning, and formed us in your own image’***

Having set out some of the main interpretations that historically theologians have applied to the concept of humankind in *imago Dei*, I now consider the contributions made by feminist theologies in ongoing analysis of the concept, and how these may influence reflection on the nature of God and of women and men, particularly in terms of gendered subjectivity. I touched upon theological considerations of humankind’s moral agency and responsibility to others and to creation. I return to this, as well as the themes of the social nature of human selfhood and some practical implications of the human capacity for relationship in *imago Dei*, in Chapters 6-8. The fallen nature of human beings is explored from a feminist perspective in Chapters 10-11.

Meanwhile, in this chapter, I look at a number of feminist critiques of traditional interpretations of the notion of personhood in the image of the triune God. As I have shown, several traditional readings have focussed around such faculties as reason and will, intellect and self-reflection, whilst others base personhood primarily on relationship. Feminist analyses of these historical interpretations have taken into account gendered differences in respect of personhood, and have included a critique of the longstanding emphasis on reason, and a phallogocentric interpretation of reason, in relation to godlikeness. Such an emphasis, it has been argued, has been detrimental to women due to the association, inherited from Greek philosophy, between rationality and masculinity. From the time of Aristotle onwards, (masculinised) reason was set in opposition to (feminised) emotion. The association of rationality, spirit and masculinity with divinity led to an equally strong association of irrationality, bodiliness and femininity with animality, nature and nontheomorphism. Hence the binary pair masculine/feminine is associated with culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body to reflect the ideologies of culture which have privileged (masculinised) reason.<sup>1</sup> Thus I now turn to metaphors of female bodiliness, primarily associated with nature, sexuality, motherhood and birth, to propose an alternative imaginary for speaking of the human created in *imago Dei*.

#### ***Is There A Female Subject-position?***

I have argued that our understanding of human selfhood is closely bound up with that of the divine, so that the metaphors used for people can be virtually interchangeable with those used for God. Feminist critiques of the concept of *imago Dei*, in excavating the lacunae in texts of classical theology, centre around the absence of the female subject-position. Those speaking from a

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the devaluation of women’s thinking in relation to ‘objective’ modes of knowing, and the masculine bias in the academy, see Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger & Jill Mattuck Tarule (1986) *Women’s Ways Of Knowing: The Development Of Self, Voice and Mind* USA: Basic Books.

feminist perspective ask: if all humankind is created in the image of God, then what does this say about women's subjectivity? If women as well as men are in God's image, then what are the implications for the way we imagine and talk about God and about ourselves as gendered beings?

As Luce Irigaray has shown, the phallogocentric character of the western religious symbolic has led the human imagination to understand God not only in terms of a person, but also as a man. Reflection on God's nature involves the use of metaphors and symbols that intersect in complex ways with images of human (usually male) sexuality. Where the male religious imaginary holds sway, female gender is left largely without divine reference, whilst images of (usually male) divine gender are predominant. God has been imagined as an idealised projection of masculine identity, leaving women bereft of a divine horizon and thence of subjectivity. According to Irigaray, the quest for women's subjectivity must be brought about by a transformation of the symbolic through recognition of sexual difference: when women can find their own concepts of the divine, a 'divine fecundity' between the sexes can be made possible. (Irigaray 1986:10)

Irigaray's contention that all thought and language are gendered and that there has been an absence of a feminine subject-position is borne out in the Christian religious tradition. Historically, God-talk has tended to be dominated by men and focused on male images of the divine; men have imagined God in their own likeness and gender, leaving women with an absence of subjectivity and symbolic space. Genealogies given in scripture, as with those of any patriarchal culture, are almost exclusively male, describing a patrilinear descent (even the genealogy of Jesus Christ is given through the male line of Joseph rather than that of Mary).<sup>2</sup> They are genealogies, as Irigaray comments 'of patriarchs who are guardians to a Word transmitted to male heirs alone'. (1991:174) Feminist theologies have for some time pointed out that the scriptures were written largely (if not exclusively) by men, and historically the interpreters and teachers of the scriptures have mostly been men.<sup>3</sup> As Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues, where male existence is the benchmark for all humans and for Christian history, then within this androcentric paradigm 'only the role of women becomes a special historical problem while the androcentric presuppositions of such a historiography remain unexamined'. (Fiorenza 2003:205)

Both scripture and traditional hymnology and liturgy abound in androcentric images, including military metaphors about war, victory, marching, fighting and armour. Language alluding to hierarchy - royalty, kingship, dominion - is also prominent. So are words to do with power, such as omnipotence, strength and

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3: 23-38.

<sup>3</sup> Athalya Brenner writes that the unusual picture of gender roles in love and sexuality depicted in the Song Of Songs may be attributable to female authorship or editorship: 'love poetry is culturally tolerated for women even in patriarchal societies'. (Brenner 2003:165) For Brenner, however, the scriptures overwhelmingly reflect a 'deeply rooted conviction in regard to woman's otherness and social inferiority'. (2003:172)

Janet Wootton includes a discussion on the Songs of Deborah, Hannah and Mary, the only songs ascribed in scripture to women. She suggests that, although scripture was no doubt recorded by men, there may have been a female oral tradition which preserved and passed on narratives that became included in the written texts. (Wootton 2000:13)

might. The fatherhood of God is celebrated in countless hymns and prayers. All these descriptions of God strive to reflect something of the indescribable divine. But this traditional God-talk speaks predominantly from a male point of view, being inspired by largely male qualities such as physical prowess, strength and greatness. Moreover, these images of God that have been developed and recorded by men may speak more immediately to men rather than to women.<sup>4</sup> Thus the male-dominated language and actions of worship reinforce a masculine/male experience and way of knowing. Brian Wren, exploring deep-seated, traditional notions of male dominance, argues that

seeing the divine life exclusively through male eyes and depicting God in the image of male dominance...implies that the other half of humanity, created co-equally in God's image and likeness, is not fit to depict that divine life. (Wren 1989:55)

In short, interpretation of the Christian narrative has left women deprived of a language and of a desire appropriate to women. This is the case with the metaphors of God as the husband of Israel and the relationship between God and Israel as a marriage. Men, the leading participants in the covenant community, take the role of the bride. In particular the priest, representative of the Church and historically always male, is thus feminised.<sup>5</sup> Women and women's sexuality are excluded from association with God the husband and, where men are symbolically feminised, women are made superfluous and irrelevant. The basic premise of sexual difference, articulated in the first Creation story, has not been worked through by later interpreters in relation to the *imago Dei*. Women's personhood and bodily integrity as people made in the image of God can occasionally be found in scripture, but these attributes hardly form a recurring motif.<sup>6</sup> Rather, women's status is defined by men and subject at all times to men's will, often leaving women voiceless, frequently nameless, and sometimes the focus for sin.

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Clark-King, however, offers an argument that certain women outside of the theological academy feel the need for a strong, powerful 'male' God. See *Theology by Heart* (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Naomi R Goldenberg suggests that in religion, men transform themselves imaginatively into women; and so 'lessen the pain, anxiety and narcissistic affront of feeling radically separate from their mothers'.(1998:206)

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions to the general rule of women's subordinate/domestic/non-public position can be found, for example, in Deborah the prophetess and judge (Judges 4). Ruth, Naomi and Esther, I suggest, offer examples of women who extend themselves beyond traditional custom in order to pursue their aims. As for Judith of the Apocrypha, slayer of her people's enemy and a woman whose behaviour is perhaps not typically feminine/female, Schussler Fiorenza lists scholars who have debated whether she is a feminist heroine. (Fiorenza 1998:10) As for the New Testament, see my comments on women at the time of Jesus' ministry and in the Early Church later in this chapter; and on Mary Magdalene in chapter 8.



recurring motif.<sup>7</sup> Rather, women's status is defined by men and subject at all times to men's will, often leaving women voiceless, frequently nameless, and sometimes the focus for sin.

This seems an extraordinary assertion. It is surely a commonplace that those who are in a position of power, status and privilege tend to hold on to it rather than give it away to those whom they regard as inferior. As Maureen McBride puts it, 'Those who have power attempt to safeguard it either through legitimate means or through deviousness'. (McBride 1996:182) Were this not so, then the Committee On Equal Opportunities For Women And Men, reporting to the Parliamentary Assembly Of The Council Of Europe, would have had no need to recommend that

Freedom of religion must not be accepted as a pretext for justifying violations of women's rights, be they open, subtle, legal or illegal, practised with or without the nominal consent of the victims – women...States must not accept any religious or cultural relativism of women's human rights. (2005:1)<sup>8</sup>

The need to affirm and uphold rights for women remains pertinent today, from the microcosm of a nuclear family through to corporate business and to the international arena of political, economic and religious institutions. Hosea's lack of sensitivity to women's integrity and dignity renders him no less complicit in a patriarchal system that legitimized the degradation and alienation of women. Men have defined the nature and will of woman and of the divine according to their own image and in doing so have found women lacking. Sheila Durkin Dierks sums up the situation thus:

The field of scripture has become a bloody battleground on which the Body of Christ, and the perceived will of God, has been terribly rent. Did a male God create women not quite human, and by His will and by gender affiliation, wish them subjugated to the will of fully human men? Or is liberation of all from oppression the passionate desire of an embracing God? (Dierks 1997:142)

It is only recently that some hermeneutics have subjected scripture to the sort of 'double reading' advocated by Grace Jantzen that allows for the possibility of women's subjectivity to be searched for within the text. Phyllis Trible, for instance, argues that the first man's recognition of the newly created woman as

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<sup>8</sup> Report On Women And Religion, Doc. 10670, by the Committee On Equal rights For Women And Men, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2005. Rapporteur: Rosmarie Zapfl-Helbling, Switzerland, Group Of European People's Party.

'bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' (Gen 2:23) shows a relationship of mutuality and equality, not superiority and inferiority. (Trible 1978:80) Historically, however, most theologians have supposed that men are more normative than women of humankind and more closely resemble the nature of God. It follows that the masculine/male is assumed to reflect more closely than the feminine/female the image of God.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, dominated by male writers, prophets, teachers and leaders, has developed according to a phallogocentric imagination, language and symbolic that has tended to understand the divine and the human from an almost exclusively male viewpoint. The result, as Catherine Keller sees it, is that metaphors for God and man are 'created in each other's image'. (Keller 1986:44) This leaves the divine to become 'the male alone' (1986:88), whilst the female becomes 'the deviant'. (1986:92) Neither the feminine nor the masculine in human selfhood can be drawn on to describe fully the divine or human potential to reflect the divine. However, to assume that one gender is closer to the divine and to image the divine largely from the viewpoint of that one gender is to handicap unnecessarily our imagination, our worship, indeed our horizon of selfhood as members of the Body of Christ. This is the situation that has pertained throughout almost the entire history of Christian religion.

### ***The Error Of Patriarchy***

Christianity, with its Jewish legacy, has from its earliest years operated within a patriarchal culture with an androcentric view of theomorphism. In this system men predominate in public and sacred roles; and family and society are headed by father-figures who keep order and rule over their dependants, including wives, children and servants, and who own property through paternal lineage. (Ruether 1996:174) Women are seen not only as non-theomorphic but also as non-normative, lacking in intelligence, unable to take roles of leadership and subject to male rationality. The Church has traditionally justified and promoted these dominating relationships, so that generations have learnt to accept them as both natural and God-given. To borrow from the language of Irigaray, Christian tradition has followed 'the story of the same', assuming the centrality and normativity of man and leaving woman in the identity-less blind spot of the 'other', the binary opposite, whose difference generates male identity. Polar differences in the feminine/female have tended to generate from and centre around bodiliness. Jantzen comments that the Fathers followed the platonic doctrine that the concept of the image of God referred not to the body (associated with the feminine/female) but to the soul or mind (associated with the masculine/male). (Jantzen 1984:3)

Karen Armstrong contends that the female body was regarded in the Early Church with disgust, and that it was 'a source of deep embarrassment to the Fathers that Jesus was born of a woman'. (Armstrong 1986:23)<sup>9</sup> Other writers see a more complex continuum of views. Beattie, for example, examines historical theological perspectives on the maternal body, including the uterus,

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that, whether or not the female body was regarded with disgust, early credal statements such as the Apostle's Creed emphasised that Jesus was born of a woman.

which was varyingly celebrated as the vehicle for life and for God's immanence and incarnation, and cursed as the source of sexual temptation and sin. She draws on Irigaray's argument that many men fantasise about the womb not as a place where we become body but as 'a devouring mouth...a sewer in which anal and urethral waste is poured...a threat to the phallus'. (Irigaray 1993c:16) Irigaray remarks on the 'filthy, mutilating words' used to describe women's sexuality and the associated feelings of 'anxiety, phobia, disgust, and the haunting fear of castration'. (1993c:16-17) An unlikely exception, perhaps, in the list of early denigrators of the maternal body is Tertullian. Although infamous amongst feminist scholars for his misogynistic teachings, Beattie finds in Tertullian a champion of the womb and of childbirth as it represents God's creative activity. Tertullian graphically describes Christ's birth in order to repudiate the Marcionite heresy:

Marcion, in order that he might deny the flesh of Christ, denied also His nativity, or else he denied His flesh in order that he might deny His nativity. (1870:164)

In contrast to Marcion, Tertullian not only affirms Mary's pregnancy and child-bearing, but goes into some detail regarding the day-to-day growth of the womb and the process of labour, criticising Marcion for his revulsion at such a 'reverend course of nature', (1870:170) which, he argues should be 'honoured in consideration of that peril, or...held sacred in respect of [the mystery of] nature'. (1870:170) He teaches that Christ 'loved his nativity, and his flesh as well'. (1870:171). Tertullian's celebration of childbirth did not prevent him, however, from seeing the womb as full of 'uncleanness' (1870:171), or from disparaging women in general as the fallen Eve. He famously remarked: 'You are the Devil's gateway...You are the first deserter of the divine law...You destroyed so easily God's image man.' (1869:304) Tertullian, then, presents a rather ambiguous picture of women who are to be honoured for their reproductive function but who nevertheless are to be regarded as non-theomorphic and who are responsible for marring men's potential to image the divine.<sup>10</sup> Overall, however, the womb has been prey to suspicion, fear, anxiety and ignorance, if not downright misogyny.

With the gradual enmeshing of Christianity into patriarchal society, women, in their symbolic association with Eve, increasingly came to be seen as sexually dangerous and threatening. As with the womb itself, women continued to be associated with impurity and therefore evil, as in many pagan and pre-Christian cultures. This association of female sexuality with sin allows patriarchy to avoid confronting the true origins of evil – the woman becomes the scapegoat and patriarchy has to look no more deeply at its own injustices.<sup>11</sup> Patriarchy points the finger of blame for the Fall on the female: it is Eve who takes the forbidden

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<sup>10</sup> Beattie concedes that Tertullian's graphic description of Christ's birth, confirming his full humanity, is unusual, in fact 'unique among the writings of the Christian tradition'. (Beattie 1999:76-77)

<sup>11</sup> Mary Daly explores her own view of the woman as scapegoat in *Beyond God The Father*, 1986:60-62, 75-77. Daly argues that Christianity has fostered women's role as scapegoats, especially in connection with the assumption of women's proneness to evil.

fruit (Gen 3:16).<sup>12</sup> The domination of woman by man is described in Genesis as a consequence of the Fall. She is spiritually equal to man in the pre-lapsarian order of creation.

Yet, despite the Early Church's radical message of reconciliation of all things in Christ, a tendency towards dualism in the early years never allowed this doctrine to become fully developed in terms of sexual difference. Eve, being second to Adam in order of creation, remained subordinate in terms of bodily existence (although not in her rational soul). Because Eve was the first to sin, thereby becoming subordinate to Adam, so patriarchy through history has put women in an inferior position to men, both in relation to the human community and in their capacity to reflect the divine. As Ruether puts it, the female has been defined as 'second in creation and first in sin'. (1985:86) Thus Eve's first sin has served to justify women's historical inferiority; women have been regarded as defective and more prone to sin, less able to image the divine, and therefore as requiring to be kept from holy objects and spaces. As Eve is the dangerous temptress and Mary of Nazareth the saint, so women have been polarized and portrayed starkly as either (bad) whores or (good) virgins, in the gutter or on a pedestal. Either way, women's identity and therefore their capacity to image the divine is closely tied to, and devalued because of, their bodiliness.<sup>13</sup>

Since virginity takes its reference from sexual inactivity as whoredom does from sexual activity, it can be seen that patriarchy, in using these categories, largely defines women in terms of their relationship to men. And men's ambivalent attitude to women, their bodies, their bodily functions and their sexuality is related to a fragmented and distorted view of sexuality and its purported association with impurity and evil.<sup>14</sup> The paradox of men's simultaneous desire, fear and abhorrence of women's bodies is summed up by a male character in a novel by André Brink:

What is this shameful reasoning? Because you are a maid you must be a whore. Because you are a woman you must be a whore. Because I can defile you you must be a whore. Because I despise myself you must be a whore. Because I am a man you must be a whore. (Brink 2000:174)

Brink here cogently illustrates the tendency in patriarchal culture to put one half of humanity at odds with the other and so to create unequal and oppressive relationships. From a feminist standpoint, the stories of the Fall and of the eviction from Eden do not depict women's peculiar proneness to evil or their secondary status, assumptions that inevitably open the way for the sort of dehumanising aggression expressed by Brink's character. Rather, the story tells of the age-old incomplete and dysfunctional relationship between the sexes,

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<sup>12</sup> Beattie argues that women's subordination to man is a result not of the order of creation but of the Fall, and reflects the sinful disordering of relationships as a consequence of human rebellion against God. (Beattie 2002:17)

<sup>13</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson draws on Paul Ricoeur's work on defilement and on Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection to analyse the Adamic story of the Fall in terms of women's potential subjectivity, sexual identity and relation to the divine. (Anderson 1998:209-230)

<sup>14</sup> It is arguable that this attitude is evident in such scriptural texts as Hosea.

lived out in a patriarchal culture in which women are perceived as 'other', inferior and associated with evil. Ruether sees the Eden story as being 'shaped by males to blame women' for the hardships of physical labour and illness, (Ruether 1992:144) and as harking back to an idyllic pre-agricultural society and an idealised (male) childhood. In Ruether's view, the root of our eviction from Eden lies in a thirst for domination and power that denies men's interdependency with women and is exploitative of other people and of the biota. This male elite creates 'cultures of deceit which justify this exploitation by negating the value of those they use, while denying their own dependence on them'. (1992:200)

Patriarchy's undervaluing of the feminine/female and its failure to develop an ethic of sexual difference is understood by many Christian feminists to be in defiance of the concept of *imago Dei* portrayed in Genesis and exemplified by Jesus in his community. Lavinia Byrne comments: 'there is no hierarchy in Jesus' scheme of things'. (Byrne 1988:80) Jesus displayed a level of inclusivity that, within the context of contemporary codes, was shocking to those around him, even sometimes dismaying his closest followers. Gerhard Lohfink notes that Jesus integrated women freely among his students in a way that would have been highly unusual in contemporary culture. (1982:91) He recognised women as subject equally with his male disciples to God's grace. The original community, the model for future generations of believers, showed that there was to be no discrimination on grounds of gender any more than on grounds of wealth or rank. Female disciples followed Jesus during his ministry and remained with him at the crucifixion (John 19:25-27). He taught women as well as men (Luke 10:39) and extolled the action of the woman who anointed him with precious nard, an action he interpreted as a signal of his coming burial (Mark 14 3-9).<sup>15</sup> He did not condemn the woman taken in adultery, but saved her from death (John 8:3-11). His stories included many images that would resonate especially for women – the lost coin, the wedding feast, yeast and bread, the widow. There is no scriptural evidence of his patronising, devaluing or disregarding women in the way that much modern historical research would suggest is characteristic of his contemporary society.

Much Christian feminism looks to Jesus as embodying a newly envisioned inclusivity that overcame differences such as gender, class and race and embraced all peoples into one body. The New Way overturned traditional concepts of 'otherness' and exclusion. Yet within a comparatively short time the radically inclusive nature of Christ's ministry and teaching regarding women had been largely subsumed in the Church's reversion to a patriarchal worldview. His affirmation of the full personhood, status and potential of women in *imago Dei* remained largely ignored, disputed or denied through the greater part of Church history. The woman who anointed Jesus stands perhaps as a marker to the invisibility of most women and much of the feminine/female in the history of the Church. As Schussler Fiorenza remarks, the one who performed that prophetic

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<sup>15</sup> It was the prophetic action of this woman that prompted the title of Fiorenza's seminal work, *In Memory Of Her* (1983), which led to many further feminist biblical studies (Parsons 2002:105) The author herself remarks that 'Many groups of Christians around the world have utilized this book as a jumping-off point for articulating their own feminist self-understanding and vision'. (Fiorenza 1983/94:xv)

sign-act is not even named, despite Jesus foretelling that ‘what she has done will be told in memory of her’ (Mark 14:9). (Fiorenza 1994:xlili) What happened in the early years of the Church to dilute and back-track on the radically inclusive example set by Jesus and his community?

### ***Tensions In The Early Church***

Bill Witherington III notes that, shortly after the Gospels took their final form, there is evidence of an increasingly patriarchal orientation taking over the Church. (1998:212) This early retrenchment is likely to have been fostered by the tensions felt amongst believers following a religion regarded by contemporary society as not only ‘foreign’ but counter-cultural and perhaps anti-establishment. Witherington argues that, if there were resistance, for instance, to women assuming prominent roles, ‘it is to the Evangelists’ credit that they did not try to obscure this fact, indeed they often focused on it’. (1998:182) Their commitment, however, was overturned within a couple of generations. The evidence of the New Testament, according to Witherington, points to a reformation rather than a repudiation of the universal patriarchal structure of family and society. (1998:3) Many feminist thinkers would offer a more radical interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

Recent research has shown that there were women among the apostles, co-workers and prophets of the New Way.<sup>17</sup> This new community is characterised by the inclusive initiation rite of baptism, open to women and men, boys and girls. In the Christian tradition this took over as the distinguishing imprint of identity from circumcision, the Jewish male-only near equivalent. JP Newell, a Christian minister, argues that in the Jewish mystical tradition, the practice of circumcision, in uncovering the phallus, was a reminder that ‘our origins are in the phallus or loins of God’. (Newell 2000:82) Rabbi Isidore Epstein explains that circumcision enforces the significance of the covenant, and is ‘a mark of consecration to the service of God’, open to all who wish to join the Abramic community. (Epstein 1959/68:14) Neither Epstein nor Newell mention the sexually exclusive nature of this practice, from which half the community is omitted. It would seem to point, however, to the historically androcentric nature of the culture, in which the male is taken to be normative and representative of both sexes. In contrast, baptism has from the earliest years of Christianity been offered to all believers, regardless of sex or other distinction. The initiation rite reflects the belief, as expressed in Gal 3:28, that all people are equal before

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, Ruether sees in Jesus ‘a prophetic vision that stands in judgement on social and religious systems that exclude subordinated and marginated people from divine favour’. (Ruether 1990:142). Fiorenza, as mentioned above, sees Jesus’ ministry as a *basileia* vision of equals, a radical eschatological reversal of old values which would bring to fulfilment the hopeful words of the Magnificat. (Fiorenza 1983:chap 4)

<sup>17</sup> Schussler Fiorenza describes Prisca as ‘one of the most prominent head of a house-church and outstanding co-worker of Paul’, who was independent from the Apostle and not under his authority. (Fiorenza 2003:210) She also argues for Phoebe’s great authority, not only within the local community but wider afield. (2003:212)

God without distinction of gender, and that all may receive redemption and be marked by spiritual gifts.<sup>18</sup>

The radical equality between the sexes in baptism may have been further marked by those performing the rite. Schussler Fiorenza notes evidence that at least until the third century women performed baptism and were able to act as leaders of worship. (1983:235) In a similar vein, Teresa Berger argues that the prohibition by the fourth century on women baptising, teaching, anointing and healing 'has to be read as pointing to liturgical functions women did, in fact, exercise'. (1999:17) Wall paintings in catacombs appear to show women presiding at the Eucharist, although opinions differ. (Steinhauser 1998:63)<sup>19</sup> Inscriptions on graves in southern Italy have been cited as evidence of female priests. (1998:64)<sup>20</sup> Berger points out that the earliest Christian gathering for worship took place in the home – that is, in women's space, 'a context congenial to the active participation and leadership of women'. (Berger 1999:33) This setting, Berger argues, aided the work of women in evangelistic and ritual roles. (1999:33)

Tensions between followers of The Way and the wider community are indicated by attempts in the Epistles to steer congregations towards an accommodation with prevailing culture and custom. Despite spiritual emancipation, believers are urged to heed societal constraints as far as these might lead to social harmony and not contradict matters of faith.<sup>21</sup> So, for instance, 1 Peter includes direction on the submission of wives to their husbands as part of a strategy for the Church's continued existence during difficult times (1 Pet 3:1-6). Comparison is made between subjection to the Lord and subjection by women to their husbands. The author of Ephesians maintains that 'the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour' (Eph 5:21). The patriarchal marriage tradition is brought alongside the notion of Church as body and Pauline bride-bridegroom imagery. (Fiorenza 1983:269)<sup>22</sup> Schussler Fiorenza argues that, in using the metaphor of head and body, bridegroom and bride, 'the relationship between Christ and the

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<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Osiek observes that the rite of baptism was coming into favour for initiation of proselytes of both sexes at about the time *Galatians* was written. She suggests that the rite developed from the Jewish custom of 'purification by periodic ritual washing by immersion in a *miqveh*, or pool. (Osiek 2003:190)

<sup>19</sup> Berger suggests that an all-female grouping the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome indicates the Greco-Roman practice of seating men and women separately at table. (Berger 1999:35)

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on women and frescos possibly depicting the Eucharist, see Damien Casey, *The 'Fracto Panis and the Eucharist as Eschatological Banquet*, [http://www.mcauley.acu.edu.au/theology/Issue2/Damien\\_Casey.htm](http://www.mcauley.acu.edu.au/theology/Issue2/Damien_Casey.htm)

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, directions on the submission of wives to husbands in 1 Pet 3:1-6; Col 3:18, Eph 5:22-24.

<sup>22</sup> Fiorenza maintains that the bride/bridegroom notion is found for the first time in Christian scripture in 2 Cor 11:2: 'I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ'. (Fiorenza 1983:269)

Church...becomes the paradigm for Christian marriage and vice versa'. Fiorenza 1983:269) Here, then, is an example of a cultural tradition (in this case a patriarchal marriage code) being informed and reinforced by a theological paradigm (in this case of subordination and inequality, as in the relationship between the Church and Christ). Schussler Fiorenza sees the advice on marriage and other matters given in the Pastoral Epistles, often for missionary purposes, as 'the beginnings of patriarchalization' within the Church. (1983:279)

This trend continued through church history, and it is evident that the relationship between Christ and the Church was taken as a divine model for the patriarchal marriage code. Its asymmetrical nature is apparent in the liturgy for the Solemnization of Marriage in the Book Of Common Prayer, where the bride swears obedience to her husband.<sup>23</sup> Church teaching has consistently followed the assumption that the patriarchal model of marriage, in which the wife is basically the property of her husband, is divinely ordained.<sup>24</sup> Matthew Henry, in his commentary of 1721, reasons that 'God has given the man the pre-eminence and a right to direct and govern by creation'; moreover, he has (what he ought to have) a superiority in wisdom and knowledge'. (Henry 1721 vol VIII:341) Christ's headship over the Church is taken to prescribe the relationship between husband and wife. Similarly, Brooke Foss Westcott, Lord Bishop of Durham, in his 1906 commentary on Ephesians, does not question the divine-human axis of the marriage metaphor. He explains that 'The Church offers to Christ the devotion of subjection, *as the wife to the husband*'. (Westcott 1906:84, my italics).

Leonardo Boff, writing in the 1980s, comes to a rather different conclusion. He examines this passage in the context of marriage as the most profound relationship between a woman and man. He argues that the author is here reiterating the Jewish view that marriage is symbolic of the relationship between God and Israel, and analogous with the head in relation to the body. Just as the head is master of the body, so the husband is head of his wife. However, for Boff, this passage is not defining the relationship between husband and wife; rather, it is starting with the particular cultural concept of female subordination then present to model the relationship between Christ and the Church. (Boff 1987:69) To express the truth of God's love for the Church, the author of Ephesians 'used the cultural concept of Jewish marriage as understood and lived in his own time...the husband is "head" of the woman who is subject to him'. (1987:69). Just as with slavery, these culturally-given symbols of inequality should not be taken as prescriptions for marriage or for gender, cultural or race relations today. However, at the time these Epistles were written, the reversion to patriarchal patterns of submission could have been promoted as an aid to the viability and stability of the Church during a difficult period.

Where questions of faith and dogma moulded the position of women, Witherington points out that the shift towards an 'over-realised, vertical

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<sup>23</sup> This wording is no longer obligatory but is still an option in modern marriage services.

<sup>24</sup> Vestiges of this code are still apparent today. John Shelby Spong cites the example of those marriage ceremonies 'where one man "gives the woman away" to another man as if she were a male possession'. (Spong 1998:153)



eschatology' (Witherington 1998:216) is material to the growing dualism, otherworldly orientation and world-denying nature of early Christianity. Pauline writings attempt to interpret the present situation within an eschatological dimension by balancing 'the old roles of women in the physical family with their new roles in the family of faith'. (1998:219) In 1 Corinthians there is affirmation of equality and freedom for all, and encouragement for believers of both sexes to remain free from the bonds and responsibilities of marriage where appropriate (1 Cor 7). On the other hand, women's behaviour in marriage and worship is subordinated to the interests of mission, social acceptability and good order - constraints later evolving into forms of subordination that barred women from most leadership roles, except teaching other females. (Fiorenza 1983:315) Instructions concerning the behaviour of both men and women rests, according to Schussler Fiorenza, not primarily with theological reasons but with concern for decency, propriety and order. (Fiorenza 2003:219)

The viability of the Early Church was seen as of primary importance and as overriding the needs and aspirations of any particular group within it. Later on, these temporary constraints imposed by its leadership came to be seen as prescriptive for all time rather than as forming a politically prudent compromise in the earliest Church. Thus the radical message of inclusivity and equality before God inherent in Jesus' ministry and teaching became gradually diluted as the Early Church reverted to prevailing contemporary attitudes and customs relating to gender. Women's prominence in the Church became muted as the process continued of adapting Christian traditions to contemporary beliefs about women's inferior status. Within the first Christian century, the expanding Church evolved into a hierarchical, patriarchal institution that strove to keep women outside the holy and sacred.

The Church Fathers, according to Elizabeth A Clark, tended to focus in their studies on New Testament exegesis on 'verses that provided a rationale for restricting, not for freeing, women', (Clark 1983:16) thus reverting to traditional, patriarchal assumptions about the feminine/female. In the early years of the third century, Tertullian in Carthage taught female submission to male authority; and to the east, in Alexandria, Origen rejected women's public ministry. (Ruether 1998b: 62) In contrast to the practice of the earliest believers, women were now explicitly banned from preaching and teaching. (Hilkert 1997:150) Writings that focussed on the experiences of women, such as the oracles of female prophets, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, a story about a woman missionary, were not included in the canon of scripture. (Fiorenza 1983:173) A woman's femaleness again became associated with defilement, shame and ontological impurity, and further religious codes developed that were based on women's biological functions.<sup>25</sup> The chief route for greater freedom for the Christian woman in the late patristic era was asceticism: the renouncement of the sexual life and of the married state, either through lifelong virginity or following widowhood. (Clarke 1983:17)<sup>26</sup> Christology, the theology of the person

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<sup>25</sup> I examine more closely the issue of defilement, shame and impurity in chapter 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ruether points out that monasticism proved to be a double-edged sword for women. Celibacy offered an alternative to the patriarchal subordination of women. But male

and redeeming ministry of Jesus, became a doctrine of the subjugation of women modelled on patriarchy rather than a doctrine of inclusive liberation and mutuality.

The anti-female, anti-body polarity accepted by the Church Fathers became an accepted part of Christian theology although, as Felicity Edwards has remarked, it was 'grossly anti-incarnational and a prime example of culture suppressing an integral part of the gospel'. (Edwards 1995:180) Restrictions on the ministry and status of women continued through succeeding centuries. Natalie Watson refers to the formation of firmer Church leadership structures as a major component of such restrictions. The Church's increasing institutionalisation lowered women's participation through the development of the all-male priesthood and by the emergence of a monarchical episcopate. (Watson 2003:18)

### ***Female Imagery: A Refiguration Of Phallogentric Symbol Patterns***

The phallogentric bias in the religious symbolic that I have briefly outlined has been particularly non-redemptive for women, and has engendered a discordant and unbalanced partnership between the feminine/female and the masculine/male, thus hampering the fulfilment of both sexes in their religious quest. God is seen as the omnipotent male ruler of his household, the world. His chosen community is his wife or, in the Christian tradition, the Bride of Christ, whom he saves from infidelity and harlotry. Judaeo-Christian scriptures have been shaped by the concept of this asymmetrical marriage partnership, and have themselves influenced cultural attitudes towards the status of women, the role of marriage and the relationship between women and men.<sup>27</sup>

Bride/marriage metaphors, used to depict something of the relationship between God and people, assume, as Graetz points out, 'the patriarchal view of women's subservient role'. (1995:139) The bride metaphor today appears to be fraught with difficulty, especially for those interpreters and readers sensitive to the relatively recent theological, philosophical and legal developments in the status of women as persons in their own right and of marriage as a partnership of equals.<sup>28</sup> In this patriarchal world social systems and cultural symbols are

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ascetics also propagated the notion that women represented 'a lower sinful world of sexuality', leading to deepened misogyny. (Ruether 1985:14)

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of this metaphor in relation to sexual violence against women, see Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks 'Every Two Minutes: Battered Women And Feminist Interpretation in Russell, Letty M. ed 1985 *Feminist Interpretation Of The Bible* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press pp. 96-107

<sup>28</sup> The question of the reader is addressed by Exum (1996:120). For her, the offensive nature of the metaphor of the abusive husband/deity and humiliated wife is intensified by the fact that it is intended for a male readership. Men are being shocked into changing their behaviour by the insult of depicting them as women, who are necessarily inferior and subservient. This in itself, she argues, is insulting to women. As an interpretive strategy in response to approaching the prophetic rhetoric of sexual abuse, she suggests paying attention to the gendered approach of both female and male readers; honesty about exposing what she calls 'prophetic pornography' (Exum 1996:124);

structured hierarchically – male over female, husband over wife, master over servants, father over other members of the family. Patriarchy understands God in terms of these male-centred hierarchical orders, with their low view of women and their assumptions about women’s particular proneness to sin.

Feminist theologians who have re-visited Christian scripture and history from a non-androcentric stance have challenged the roots of this patriarchal symbolic pattern. They point up the problems not only in the phallogocentric imagery of Christian religion but, as Exum argues, in ‘the ideology that informs this imagery’, predicated as it is on an understanding of women’s bodies as the property of men. (Exum 1996:112-3)<sup>29</sup> Women, in this view, are inferior to men, and can therefore serve as a metaphor for a community that recognizes its subservient relationship to the divine. The nation of Israel, for example, is thus feminised by Hosea since it is subject to God.<sup>30</sup> Hence the dualistic positions of superiority and subservience, autonomy and dependence accorded to the divine/human relationship have been accorded to the relationship between men and women.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the new covenant ushered in by Jesus, women continued to suffer under the lingering, patriarchal model of power with its failure to acknowledge sexual difference and its fear of female sexuality. Many women subsequently still endure a sense of alienation across the denominational spectrum of the institutional church.<sup>32</sup> Efforts have been made in recent years to address the

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looking within the texts for the woman’s hidden discourse; and a systematic deconstructive reading of the text, of which she cites Yvonne Sherwood’s treatment of Hosea (*The Prostitute And The Prophet* 1996) as an example.

<sup>29</sup> Another example of the abuse of a woman as violation of a man’s property is to be found in the rape of the Levite’s concubine, Judg 19 – 20. Mary Grey comments: ‘the crime was that the man’s property had been misused, not that a woman had been abused. The silence which cries out from this story is that nowhere does the Bible condemn this explicitly as a crime against female sexuality’. (Grey 1993:23)

<sup>30</sup> Exum lists examples of foreign cities that are enemies of Israel being feminised/sexually abused (Exum 1996:101-2). The insult of feminising men is clear. See also Gordon & Washington, ‘“You May Enjoy The Spoil Of Your Enemies”’: Rape As A Military Metaphor In The Hebrew Bible’ in Brenner 1995:308-325 on the use of sexual imagery to portray military conquest.

<sup>31</sup> Yvonne Sherwood makes the point that language feminising a man is still regarded as abusive. (1996:263) Indeed, a building site or other male-dominated arena will quickly yield examples of bawdy insults that feminise men, e.g. (said pejoratively to a man acting stupidly), ‘Do you sit down to pee?’ Other insult words referring to the feminine/female are listed by Deborah Cameron (1985/92:107-109), who notes that there are more words available to insult women than men, especially in sexual terms (1985/92:107). She notes that linguistic practices such as this type of insult ‘create a certain reality in and of themselves: they are, in fact, a form of social control and definition’. (1985/92:109)

<sup>32</sup> See Winter, Miriam Therese, Adair Lummis and Allison Stokes, *Defecting In Place*. The authors report the results of their survey showing that three out of five women affiliated with Protestant churches, and four out of five Roman Catholic women, report a

exclusion of the feminine/female, for instance in the matter of the overwhelmingly phallogocentric nature of Christian God-talk. In their 1988 report, *Making Women Visible*, the Liturgical Commission of the General Synod aimed to counterbalance the hitherto overwhelmingly male orientation of liturgical language. The report states: 'For some the use of male terms to include women is offensive to the dignity which women have by creation and baptism'. (1988:21) Mindful of the power of words to mould a personal sense of identity and aspiration, the report suggests supplementary texts that

draw on feminine imagery in scripture and tradition so as to allow the force of such imagery to be felt without going beyond scripture in a way that is controversial or speculative. (1988:4)

Suggested scriptures include Isaiah's feminine references to Jerusalem (Isa. 66:10-14) as a canticle and as a sentence for general use; and Jesus' address to the haemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:34), to be used after Communion. The commission suggested more inclusive use of pronouns (he/she) and family members (brothers/sisters) and alternatives to male words (for example 'forebears' rather than forefathers'). The subsequent Book of Common Worship gives alternatives using inclusive language: in the confession, for instance, 'fellow men' is replaced by 'neighbour'. Change, however, is not easy. The Methodist minister and writer on liturgy Norman Wallwork comments: 'There is hurt for all in the inclusive language debate...until each of us becomes inclusive, through and through, we shall constantly trip over our own metaphors'. (Wallwork 1990:7) As Wallwork indicates, changes to extant texts are only part of the process of re-visioning religious language to include the feminine consciousness; tackling deeper, structural issues calls for a paradigm shift for everyone steeped in the traditions of the Church.

Janet Morley's collection of prayers, *All Desires Known* (1992/98) is an example of a project that mines the religious imaginary in a way that reaches beyond tinkering with pronouns.<sup>33</sup> She leans on women's experiences and on feminine/female imagery to 'free the imagination to explore the unimaginable ways in which God reaches us'. (Morley 1998:xi) For many women, their relationship with God may well be enriched by reflecting on their own experience, for instance as childbearers and mothers, whereas traditional male-dominated theology that has ignored sexual difference has left them with few positive, realistic symbols with which to identify. Margaret Hebblethwaite explores this in her book *Motherhood and God*, in which she examines God-as-mother metaphors in scripture and those developed by great teachers such as St Augustine and Mother Julian of Norwich. (Hebblethwaite 1984:127) The mother-child relationship is primary, she argues, and is therefore 'privileged as the model for the God who creates us, cherishes us, nourishes us and bestows on us the gift of love. We cannot but accept that God is our mother.' (1984:139)

Sallie McFague, in looking at the inter-relatedness between the divine and the created, suggests that creation can be expressed in terms of birth from the

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feeling of alienation. (Winter, Lummis & Stokes 1995:43) This survey was conducted in the USA.

<sup>33</sup> See also Morley, Janet and Hannah Ward (1983) *Celebrating Women* London: MOW, a collection of worship material written by women from a range of denominations.

womb of God: since 'The universe is bodied forth from God, it is expressive of God's very being'. (McFague 1987:110) This model, she argues, speaks of kinship, concern and affinity, attributes whereby 'the dualism of God and the world is undercut'. (1987:111) Similarly, Sara Maitland advocates the 'mother' image that speaks eloquently of the role of creation through hard work – the labour of childbirth and the agony of Christ on the cross that gave us new life:

the creative birthing of God as expressed in Christ's passion (and reiterated in the rituals of baptism) can be given a deeper relating if we can learn to hear as holy the bodily experiences of women and trust the metaphor of God as mother. (Maitland 1990:154)

Creation as a birthing process is explored by Kathy Galloway in her poem *A Labour of Love*. This likens the Genesis story to pregnancy, labour and the appearance of a child. (Galloway 1993:17) In the same year that this was published, Monica Sjoö and a group of women took a painting entitled *God Giving Birth* to a service in Bristol Cathedral, where they displayed a placard declaring the end of patriarchy. (Raphael 1996:230)<sup>34</sup> The year before, Elizabeth Johnson published her book *She Who Is*, suggesting this title as a necessary name for God to shake off the constraints of patriarchy and to affirm women's personhood in *imago Dei*. (Johnson 1992:243) She also advocates the birth metaphor, particularly since women's travail and joy in relation to creative powers offer a 'superb metaphor for Sophia-God's struggle to birth a new people, even a new heaven and earth', an image of God in labour made explicit in Isa. 42:14.

Virginia Mollenkott argues that the image of the maternal deity carrying or birthing creation is the most pervasive of all the biblical feminine images. (Mollenkott 1983:15) For her, the Christian notion of being 'born-again' affirms the female component of the Godhead: 'To proclaim that people 'must be born again' is to urge them to experience the womb and the birth canal of God the Mother'. (1983:18) The very presence of female images of God in scripture, recorded at a time of overwhelming male dominance, should, she argues, be a matter of surprise, delight and challenge. (1983:112) Some, however, even relatively recently, have found the God-as-mother image totally unacceptable. According to Elspeth and Gordon Strachan, a report entitled 'The Motherhood Of God', commissioned for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1984, was vilified by many church members for demonstrating the scriptural sanctioning of female and motherly images of God. (Strachan & Strachan 1985:185) The Assembly refused even to discuss it. (1985:155) The Strachans suggest that resistance to the God-as-mother image stems from 'an unconscious (or even conscious!) acceptance of the traditional demeaning of women and their association with uncleanness'. (1985:152) The female in relation to the divine, it seems, is for some too redolent of the body and its closeness to the earth, as opposed to the male's association with mind and spirit. Yet the insistence on an all-male God is, according to the Strachans, similarly pagan: 'those who try to make [God] uncompromisingly masculine reduce him to something akin to an Iron Age Marduk'. (1985:153)

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<sup>34</sup> This would have been a few months prior to Bristol Cathedral hosting the first ordination of women priests in England.

That the God-as-mother image may offend some is neatly countered by Wren: 'The worry that men might not be able to relate a 'motherly' God to male experience makes it possible to suggest that an all-male God has a similar effect on women'. (Wren 1989:220) Elizabeth Johnson observes that hitherto exclusive language about God has supported 'an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women...it undermines women's human dignity as equally created in the image of God'. (Johnson 1993:5) She argues that women must enter the religious symbolic in order that

the idolatrous fixation on one image [can] be broken and the truth of the mystery of God, in tandem with the liberation of all human beings and the whole earth, [can] emerge for our time. (1993:56)

The potential emergence of a female religious symbolic must involve deep structural changes to language. As Mary Grey notes, even where feminine/female spiritual qualities, such as those of motherhood, are used, these are often based on a patriarchal view of sexuality, where the father is the active, creative agent and the mother simply the empty vessel. (Grey 1993:128) Ricoeur has shown that symbols, always polysemic, are a 'revealing substrate' of speech that give rise to thought. (Ricoeur 1974:299) The process of reflecting on the nature and symbolism of the divine and of ourselves and on the way these are signified can become a closed one which resists alterity and innovation, or an open, dynamic one that adapts to new and re-visioned interpretations in its aspiration towards a divine that is beyond representation. Symbols around the trinitarian God have historically been largely interpreted and developed by powerful, celibate, intellectual males within the institutional hierarchy of the Church. A patriarchal culture privileges masculine traits above female ones, and applies the same pecking order to gender characteristics as applied to God. Women and women's experience are thus doubly subordinated and devalued. Not only are feminine/female qualities underrated in society, but where they reinforce societal norms (as in the case, for instance, of submission and subjugation), then as Monica Furlong points out in her contribution to *Mirror To the Church: Reflections On Sexism*, they are 'enthusiastically recommended (for women) by men who fail to share them'. (Furlong 1988:130)

The process of refiguration brings new light to bear on meanings within the symbol that have previously been overlooked or occluded. For instance, the metaphor of the 'father' figure is steeped in the dynamic interplay of socio-cultural, psycholinguistic and theological interpretations which bear a range of resonances in terms of gender and life experience. Ricoeur acknowledges that the father is an incomplete figure, a designation with a range of semantic levels 'from the phantasm of the father as castrator, who must be killed, to the symbol of the father who dies of compassion'. (Ricoeur 1974:468) The meaning attached to the designation can, he finds, be problematic. He notes that there are relatively few instances of God as father in the Old Testament – in fact less than twenty. The God of the Exodus is not in the position of father but of the active agent, the law-giver, bearer of the Name without image. (1974:484) The 'I Am' of Yahweh (Exodus 3:14) is 'a dissolution of all anthropomorphisms...including that of father'. (1974:486) Israel is the 'chosen' son by a word of designation rather than genealogy: 'fatherhood itself is entirely

dissociated from begetting'. (1974:487)<sup>35</sup> Fatherhood, however, is evident in some prophetic texts with an eschatological element (e.g. Jeremiah 3:4, 19-20; Isaiah 64:8). The writers here are looking toward the banquet to come, the figure of the new creation. In the New Testament, by contrast, John's Gospel alone carries over a hundred occurrences of God as father, whereas in Mark there are only four – evidence, to Ricoeur, that the designation was initially rare and later expanded. Again, Ricoeur places these designations, as in the Lord's Prayer, in the eschatological category of the kingdom: 'Fatherhood is thus placed in the realm of a theology of hope'. (1974:489) Similarly, Jesus' *Abba* is directed more toward fulfilment than origin. For Ricoeur, 'there is fatherhood because there is sonship, and there is sonship because there is community of spirit'; and as in Romans 8:16, because the Spirit witnesses our sonship we can cry *Abba*. (1974:491) For Ricoeur, then, the designation 'father' does not concern begetting but rather, as Gavin D'Costa summarises in his comments on Ricoeur's argument:

election, intimacy and the inauguration of an eschatologically new creation of the kingdom, a relationality that is open to the women and men who imitate Jesus through the power of the Spirit. (D'Costa 2000:81)

Following Ricoeur's argument, it becomes possible to leave behind the notion of divine fatherhood in terms of a biological essentialism that has been read back from the traditional patriarchal culture in which it originated and projected simplistically onto the first person of the Trinity. Fatherhood in Jesus' usage is, according to Ricoeur, not about begetting but about the eschatological hope of the new creation in anticipation of which believers aspire to live with one another in loving relationship.

### ***Trinitarian Symbolism: Towards A Relational Spirituality***

Ricoeur's argument goes some way to ease feminist concerns about the apparently essential 'male' designation of God by separating the notions of begetting and biological destiny from that of loving relation. Yet historically this distinction has not been clear, the upshot being that the Trinity has been interpreted primarily in 'male' terms, even where the Spirit has been designated as 'female'. Recent feminist analysis of the doctrine of the Trinity has sought to redress the gender asymmetry in naming the triune God.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Cocksworth

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<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur does not comment here on why, in this context where the relationship is not based on metaphorical procreation, Israel should be designated 'son' rather than 'daughter'. Feminine terms for Israel are adopted elsewhere in scripture, as I noted earlier.

<sup>36</sup> A general neglect by feminist thinkers of the doctrine of the Trinity has been addressed only relatively recently. In the early 1980s, Patricia Wilson-Kastner lamented the 'remarkable lack of enthusiasm for the Trinity in feminist circles', (Wilson-Kastner 1983:122) at least in part because traditional trinitarian doctrine has been seen by many feminists to reinforce notions of hierarchy and underscore divine maleness. Indeed, it has been said that the appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity has been actively employed to bolster the subordination of women to men. (LaCugna 1993b:84) Katharine von Kellenbach remarks that: 'The trinitarian expression of patriarchal monotheism has no advantages for feminists since the trinitarian God has usually been imagined as all-

acknowledges the recovery of different ways of naming the triune God, and experimenting with new names, as one of the great strengths of some feminist writing on the Trinity. (Cocksworth 1997:22)

Phallogocentric God-talk has been seen to lead to the exclusion of women's experience. Pastorally, much damage to women has been recorded where 'male' interpretations have been associated with alienation, subjugation and abuse. Referring to the 'male' designations for the persons of the Trinity, Cocksworth notes the damage done to women and men by dysfunctional father figures, as a result of which the 'male' language of worship can be deeply problematic.<sup>37</sup> Brian Wren argues that 'Masculinity As We Know It' (MAWKI) is problematic for the theology of the Trinity, since it contrasts what society considers to be masculine with what it regards as feminine, with the result that the dynamic, living and loving God is depicted almost exclusively through the perspective of a flawed maleness. (Wren 1989:2) Catherine Keller, considering women's selfhood in patriarchal society, argues that so long as the divine is imaged in these masculine metaphors, then 'there is simply no chance for conversion to a fundamentally relational spirituality'. (Keller 1986:38) Adopting gender-inclusive, gender-neutral or female language and imagery for the deity is, for her, essential (although not in itself sufficient) for a viable God-talk.

For some, inclusive language for naming God is intolerably problematic. Stanley Grenz, for instance, in his contribution to a collection of articles of which several argue against such language, remarks that: 'Reimagining the Christian God along feminist lines all too readily leads to the literalizing of the biblical language that feminists find so abhorrent in the "God is male" position'. (2001:291) Many feminists, however, (including McFague and Ruether) promote inclusive language not as a quest to literalise scripture but in order to move away from God-talk in terms of dominance and towards a dialogue about co-operation and inter-relatedness, relationship and embodiment. In this way, the discursive range of sacred texts – including ritual – is being enlarged in order to give attention, value and authority to the feminine/female. For instance, the desexualised terms Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer (or Sanctifier) have sometimes been adopted for the Trinity, and with some historical justification. Janet Soskice points out that there is ample precedent for such trinitarian invocation, especially in medieval literature. (Soskice 2002:141)<sup>38</sup> These terms

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male'(von Kellenbach 1994:79). Mary Daly, in *Beyond God The Father*, (1973) simply does not address the doctrine of the Trinity, having already rejected its foundational elements as irredeemably patriarchal.

<sup>37</sup> A recent Church Of England Report acknowledges that masculine imagery in God-talk, including an uncritical emphasis on headship and submission in marriage, has an association with domestic abuse. See *Responding To Domestic Abuse: Guidelines For Those With Pastoral Responsibility* (2006) London: Church House Publishing.

<sup>38</sup> Soskice does not name any specific author here, although she does in her article 'Blood And Defilement' (1994). However, mention might be made, for instance, of Julian of Norwich and her references to God as mother: 'The deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother, in whom we are enclosed'. Del Mastro, M.L. (translator), *Revelations of Divine Love of Juliana of Norwich*, New York: Doubleday, 1977:179.



have, however, themselves been criticised by feminists and non-feminists alike. Soskice argues that such epithets do not fully depict the relational character of the Trinity, and fail to reflect the 'eternal mutuality of the Three-In-One'. (Soskice 1994b:10)

In his contribution to a collection of essays which are largely critical of feminist theology, Alvin Kimel maintains that the adoption of neutral or feminine designations will lead to alienation from the Gospel, since the specific scriptural designations are central to profession of faith in the Trinity. He appeals to the early patristic writers and to the Gospel stories in naming the Trinity whose narrative functions as 'the paradigm through which both deity and creation are interpreted and [which] provides the foundational content and vocabulary for our preaching, liturgy and theology'. (Kimel 1992:191) The Father/Son relation, he argues, speaks of the deity in his divine essence, and so takes primacy over any *ad extra* relation such as creator/creature. Efforts to evade the male designations of biblical revelation are, for Kimel, 'futile and apostate', since the triune God cannot come to speech without such trinitarian namings. (1992:203) To abandon or reject the traditional trinitarian naming is tantamount to creating a new religion, a new God.

On the other hand, Soskice, in the only contribution to the same publication which is positive towards feminist theology, suggests that it is not obligatory to use only one divine title exclusively. She asks whether a feminist can tolerate fatherhood language if this binds Christianity to an outdated and now unacceptable patriarchal religion. Mere tinkering with the traditional hierarchical and dualistic language of religion and complementing it with female designations is not enough: following Ricoeur, she argues that 'we can no longer think the interrelation of ideology and language so simple or so easily unravelled'. (Soskice 1992:86) Soskice observes that in Ricoeur's scheme, Jesus' language of the fatherhood of God 'opens the way for a non-patriarchal religion of hope'. (1992:91) Religions are not patriarchal because of their designations for the divine, but because they underwrite social patterns that subordinate women to men. Soskice suggests that paternal imagery should remain in place at least in traditional liturgy, but that it should be acknowledged, as Ricoeur argues, as incomplete, mobile and less than eternal, traversing a range of meanings. Christianity, she concludes, in this sense faces a challenge that addresses its core metaphors, narratives and ideologies.

Similarly, Johnson finds that it is not always essential to use the terms Father, Son and Spirit for the triune God, and particularly at this time some explicitly female imagery helps 'to break the unconscious sway that male trinitarian imagery holds over the imaginations of even the most sophisticated thinkers'. (Johnson 2002:212) In *She Who Is*, a seminal work on the nature of the divine through the lens of feminist discourse, she argues strongly for female metaphors in language about the triune God (she herself coins the terms 'Spirit-Sophia' and 'Holy Wisdom').

Trinitarian symbolism, from a feminist theological stance, signifies for Johnson relatedness rather than solitary ego, genuine mutuality and respect for

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See also Bynum, Caroline Walker (1991) *Fragmentation And Redemption* New York: Zone Books.

difference rather than domination and subordination. At its heart is 'not monarchy but community; not an absolute ruler, but a threefold *koinonia*' (2002:216) - an idea of God far removed from the isolated patriarchal God of Enlightenment theism. Johnson characterises such relatedness by the elements of friendship – mutual trust, openness, inclusion of others, hospitality, modelled for us by the Spirit who empowers us to be friends of God, by Jesus as the incarnation of divine friendship in his inclusive community, and by the creative love of Mother Wisdom whose friendship yearns for the well-being of all her creation. (2002:217)<sup>39</sup> She suggests that such metaphors of friendship and wisdom provide an alternative to the traditionally exclusive male imagery and attendant hierarchical patterns of relationship.

Feminist critics have noted in traditional God-talk an historical lack of attention to God the Holy Spirit, who has been reduced in male imaginary to what Patricia Wilson-Kastner calls 'a ghostly whisper'. (Wilson-Kastner 1983:123) Feminist critics have noted a tendency in the dominant androcentric culture to see the three persons of the Trinity in terms of a male, hierarchical model in which the Holy Spirit is subordinate within the Godhead. Soskice maintains that this neglect has left the Spirit to function as 'edifying appendage' to the other two 'real' persons.<sup>40</sup> (Soskice 1994b:10) According to Daphne Hampson, the Spirit has 'always played second fiddle to the male Christ within trinitarian theology'. (Hampson 1996:95) Indeed, Hampson herself seems to fall prey to her own criticism when she notes at the beginning of her book *Theology And Feminism* that: 'In Christianity the basic symbol of the religion has been the trinity, the relation of Father and Son', (1996:2) a male symbolic interest in which, she adds, women may well have little interest. She later makes the point that in the classical understanding of the Trinity, relations concern those between Father and Son, a male relationship which does not symbolically embody equality between male and female. (1996:154) In both instances, the figure of the Holy Spirit is entirely absent from her argument.

The neglect of the Holy Spirit has been attributed by a number of feminist writers to the association of the Spirit with female imagery and experience, which in turn has been linked with the subordination and marginalisation of women in the Christian tradition. As Johnson puts it, 'Neglect of the Spirit and the marginalizing of women have a symbolic affinity'. (Johnson 1993:130) She notes that ancient language and symbols tended to articulate the Spirit in metaphors of female resonance; she cites *ruah*, the Hebrew word for spirit (Gen 1:2, Ps 139:13, Isa 4:4); *shekinah*, or dwelling (Ex 25:8, 29: 45-6); and *Sophia*, Greek for wisdom (Prov 1:20-33, Prov 8). (Johnson 2002:83-90) For this very

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<sup>39</sup> The metaphor of God as friend is also explored by Sallie McFague, who acknowledges that it is not all-encompassing but is one of several gender-neutral metaphors that can usefully be used. (McFague 1987:177-192)

<sup>40</sup> The neglect of the Spirit in the contemporary imagination is borne out in Ellen Clarke-King's study of the religious experience of working-class women of various denominations. A Roman Catholic interviewee, according to Clarke-King, tended instinctively to see Mary as the third person of the Trinity, whilst the Holy Spirit played only a minor role in her spiritual life. (Clarke-King 2004:79) Overall, the Spirit got only an 'occasional name check' when questions were asked about the Trinity. (2004:127)

reason, the notion of Spirit has become aligned with actual women and their marginalisation in church and society, where their ministry tends to be loyal and continuous yet largely unnoticed and anonymous. Attempting to achieve some sort of gender-balance in God-talk by referring to the Spirit in feminine terms is therefore problematic for feminists. The spirit, as I have argued, necessarily remains a rather vague, faceless and mysterious figure, so we are left with two 'male' persons, Father and Son, and an amorphous, 'female' (and possibly rather unequal) third person.<sup>41</sup>

The idea of the Holy Spirit as a shadowy, mysterious figure, possibly imaged as female in contrast to the other two 'male' persons, is seen by a number of feminist writers as a bad model for women, who are still struggling to achieve full subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> This type of anthropomorphism, it is argued, only reinforces sexual stereotypes. This is evident, for example, in Leonardo Boff's *The Maternal Face Of God: The Feminine And Its Religious Expressions* (1987) where he identifies the Spirit with feminine (and particularly maternal) traits, borne out in the archetypal figure of the Virgin Mary. As Johnson points out, this sets up categories for women (virgin and mother) that 'come nowhere near summing up the totality of what is possible for women's self-realisation'. (Johnson 2002:52)

Coakley, in an essay entitled 'The Trinity, Prayer And Sexuality,' firmly rejects any idea of the Spirit as a 'cooing "feminine" adjunct to an established male household'. (Coakley 2003:261) She contends that ascription of femininity to the Spirit perpetuates sex stereotypes in a way that constrains the Christian ideal of wholeness. This can only reinforce societal norms regarding the feminine/female, such as notions of surrendering control, submission and subjugation. Thus, as she puts it in an earlier contribution to a publication reflecting on sexism in the Church, the Spirit's perceived activity becomes restricted to traditionally 'feminine' traits, experiences and roles, always subordinated to the Father and Son. (1988:132) Daly rejects any argument that the Holy Spirit might be designated as female. In her view this would inevitably be a male idea of what is feminine, and this has nothing to do with real women: 'Drag queens, whether divine or human, belong to the Men's Association'. (1979:38) In other words, male language about the 'feminine' Spirit amounts to an attempt by men to colonise the symbolic space that might be occupied by real women.

By contrast, Johnson argues that considering the Spirit from a feminist standpoint has the effect of destabilising the dominant patriarchal image of God which has neglected the Spirit and which she finds is detrimental both to the mystery of God and to the well-being of human community. Johnson adopts an inductive approach, based on attentiveness to women's experience of church, to

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<sup>41</sup> Gavin D'Costa explores this theme in *Sexing The Trinity: Gender, Culture And The Divine* (2000) D'Costa does not declare himself a feminist but nevertheless engages here with feminist critiques in pneumatology, including the neglect of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Williams, Jane (1992) 'The Doctrine Of The Trinity: A Way Forward For Feminists?' in Elwes, Teresa, ed. *Women's Voices: Essays In Contemporary Feminist Theology* pp.31-43

re-focus attention on the Spirit in order to re-interpret trinitarian doctrine through a feminist lens:

Beginning with interpreted experience of the Spirit and thinking through to the living triune God is one way of speaking in the light of insights generated by the pattern of women's religious experience in the structural margins, a way that as a bonus brings to light much that has been largely ignored in the deductive approach. (Johnson 2002:122)

Among the ways that the Spirit is mediated to humankind Johnson includes interpersonal experience – in loving relationships, in birthing and rearing, in befriending, in groups and communities. (Johnson 2002:125-6) Noting that the Hebrew scripture acknowledges the Spirit as the prime initiator of community, forging the covenantal bonds that form the nation of Israel, Johnson describes how the Spirit continues to be manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus and then in the community of believers, a diverse group who are one in Christ because they are born of the Spirit. In the Spirit-inspired community, mutual love and respect resist domination on grounds of difference and prize reciprocity. As the Spirit is both essentially free and relational, so in this community freedom and relation are fundamental elements that 'are essential to one another and enhance one another in a correlative way'. (2002:148) And as the Spirit is essentially relational, then so is the triune God.

### ***Perichoresis: A Pattern For Relationality***

A number of feminist thinkers have made use of the notion of *perichoresis*<sup>43</sup> in exploring the relational nature of the triune God and of humankind in *imago Dei*. The term, a recurring theme in various feminist interpretations of trinitarian theology, was coined in the patristic period to describe the interrelations of the persons of the Trinity. *Perichoresis* (the equivalent Latin term is *circumincessio*, to 'move around') denotes a complete mutual interpenetration which nonetheless preserves the identity and properties of each member without confusion, and so has been applied to the persons of the Trinity as a dynamic community living in each other. In the early eighth century John of Damascus employed and enlarged the notion in his re-examination of patristic writings on the ecumenical creeds. He employed the term to signify the mutual interanimation and reciprocity of the three persons of the Trinity in a relational dynamic of both individuality and mutuality. The three persons, he writes:

dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Perichoresis* derives from the Greek verb *perichorein*, to 'contain' or to 'penetrate', with its link to Terpsichore, the muse of dancing.

<sup>44</sup> John of Damascus *Exposition Of The Orthodox Faith*, trans. DF Salmond, in Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace, eds. (1989), *The Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers Vol 9*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, quoted in Stewart, Angus, *John Of Damascus And The Perichoresis* <http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/covenant4.htm> p.8 (accessed 19.09.06).

In the current era, Jurgen Moltmann, this time in the Western Church, develops a social doctrine of the Trinity with a hermeneutic carrying implications for relationships and communities. He argues that the unity of the three persons should be perceived in the 'at-oneness of the triune God...[which is] a *perichoretic* unity'. (Moltmann 1993:150) For him, the divine unity lies in the fellowship of the three persons, thus in the kind of unity that preserves their separate character. (1993:95) The nature of the Trinity, that is of the divine reality, means more broadly that people and things are united with God and in God in that they are 'gathered into the trinitarian glorification of the Son and the Father through the Spirit.' (1993:126) The notion of perichoresis links together the threeness and the oneness, without reducing or occluding one or the other, and so avoids subordinationism: 'Interpreted perichoretically, the trinitarian persons form their own unity by themselves in the circulation of the divine love.' (1993:175) For Moltmann, the Trinity's relation of fellowship bears upon relations between people, and with creation, and so he urges an ecological way of thinking about the relation between the divine, the human and the created world, their relationships and indwellings. (1993:19)

Moltmann notes the association between interrelatedness and freedom. As opposed to a monotheism that legitimates domination, the doctrine of the Trinity is one of freedom since it points towards 'a community of men and women without supremacy and without subjugation'. (1993:192) A human community that conforms to the divine model would therefore be one where 'people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possession.' (1993:198)

Gunton similarly supports the notion of a social Trinity in addressing the modern alternatives of either individualism or collectivism. Linking the concepts of interrelatedness and freedom, he maintains that, as the three persons of the Trinity are inseparably related, and so confer particularity and freedom to each other, so creation can also be understood in terms of interrelatedness: it 'echoes the trinitarian being of God in being what it is by virtue of its internal taxis: it is, like God, a dynamic of beings in relation'. (Gunton 1991:56) Hence it is in relatedness to others that one's being consists. We are conformed to the person of Christ, the archetypal bearer of God's image, to be ourselves in the image of God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the creator of community. (1991:58-9) We find our being in relation, in the human community and with the rest of creation. Revival of the ancient notion of *perichoresis* has, in summary, provided a useful conceptual structure, not least for feminists, since it affirms the complex, dynamic interrelationship between the three persons of the Trinity which itself offers a similar model for God's relation with creation.

The attraction of the notion of perichoresis for feminist thinkers, who resist patriarchal hierarchy and oppressive forms of political and ecclesiastical organisation, is obvious. For Johnson, the metaphor of perichoretic movement evokes the notion of 'three distinct persons living in each other in an exuberant movement of equal relations' (Johnson 2002:221). This symbol of community in diversity, she maintains, is the paradigm for human interaction, a community of equals related in mutuality by which the world can express the eschatological hope of friendship, healing and justice. Catherine LaCugna, on the other hand, expresses some reservation about the use of *perichoresis* to uphold the values

of mutuality, equality and reciprocity. As I have shown, trinitarian theology has understood these qualities to be attributes of the divine substance in each person of the Trinity. However, for her, *perichoresis* should be located not in the inner life of God but in 'the mystery of the one communion of all persons, divine as well as human'. (Lacugna 1993a:274) The concept of being as communion is central to LaCugna's work. Moving away from individualist notions of personhood, she sees the trinitarian doctrine as a practical guide in understanding personhood in relationship with God and with one another, and so shaping Christian behaviour. Through God's election humans are partners in the divine dance manifest continually in creation. Through God's grace people become 'persons in full communion with God and with every creature'. (LaCugna 1991:1) There is but one *perichoresis*, God and humanity as beloved partners, as proclaimed and lived out by Jesus: 'The heart of the Christian life is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with one another'. (ibid)

It is perhaps worth noting the danger here of projection, in that feminist ideals of interrelatedness and mutuality, of unity in diversity, can be projected back from human aspiration towards the divine, and so to God-talk about the Trinity. There can be no absolute correlation: humankind cannot know God, and the nature of God's oneness is beyond human experience and imagining. Yet there are, I suggest, pointers here, in the way we surmise the three persons of the Trinity to be in relation, for communities of women and men aspiring to live together so that all people can flourish. As Wilson-Kastner remarks, the whole of the universe is interdependent, and 'the achievement of personhood is the fulfilment of the *telos* of nature.' (Wilson-Kastner 1983:289) The doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates that the true person is neither exclusively autonomous nor dependent but theonomous – related to one's origin and destiny in God. (1983:290) This is no less true of the Church, the Body of Christ, whose *telos* is to reflect the nature of the Trinity in its essential unity and in the perichoretic dance of its diversity. Interpretations of the Trinity as essentially interrelational, equal and perichoretic indicate that traditional patterns of domination and subordination should be replaced by patterns closer resembling the free personal relations of the Trinity – what Gunton calls 'an ecclesiology of perichoresis', featuring 'overlapping patterns of relationship' based on gifts and graces, wherein people have the space to be themselves in relation with others. (Gunton 1991:80)

An ecclesiology of *perichoresis* promotes patterns of relationship which afford people space to be, to be in relation, and to attain subjectivity and freedom. Women are culturally conditioned to incline towards mutuality and relatedness, but need to come to autonomy; both these dimensions are modelled in the perichoretic Trinity, and both are essential where people are to flourish. Catherine Keller maintains that women's self-definition in terms of relationship has hitherto amounted to 'psychological bondage' (Keller 1986:23) that has robbed them of self-identity and social power.<sup>45</sup> Yet the urge to become oneself need not mean the repudiation of connectedness. Feminist interpretations of *perichoresis* emphasise both the essential interrelatedness of the three persons as well their full identity and freedom.

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<sup>45</sup> I develop the notion of women's self-identity and self-denial further in chapter 10.

In a culture and language that is fundamentally sexuate, trinitarian theologies have been used to support patriarchal structures that are oppressive to women (among other groups), and which occlude the feminine/female voice. Homosexual language does not lend itself to women's becoming, or therefore to the flourishing of women or men. Gavin D'Costa, who in *Sexing The Trinity: Gender, Culture And The Divine* argues that gender and culture are crucial factors in an examination of the doctrine of the Trinity, puts it thus:

Redeemed female subjectivity is not possible out of relationship to redeemed male subjectivity; and neither male nor female redemption is possible under the sign of the phallus. (D'Costa 2000:56)

The loving, mutual relationship of the Trinity allows thought about difference that is not dualistic, and so offers a model for human sexuate relationships between individuals and groups. Yet dualistic thinking permeates our whole way of being and thinking, and where female subjectivity is sought, language must be transformed.

Following Irigaray, I have argued for the full recognition of two distinct sexuate incarnations of being in *imago Dei*. Such a recognition must inevitably incorporate a refiguration of traditional God-talk, which itself will impact on all language, worship, ritual and ways of being in community. Tina Beattie suggests that a fully developed theology of the Trinity is possible only where theology itself is 'a nuptial venture, a sharing in the intellectual activity of interpreting the male and female experiences of God.' (Beattie 1997:170) The judicious and sensitive use of inclusive designations for the trinitarian God constitutes, I would argue, one small step towards a re-visioned understanding of the divine which moves away from the traditional social construct of God in the male image.<sup>46</sup> It goes some way, also, towards a new, redemptive sexual order which allows for the cultural subjectivity and articulation of the feminine/female. In such an order the divine is mediated not solely through the male imaginary but through each person's embodied, sexuate nature.

Although, as I have shown, some steps have been made in this direction, many still see the Church as denying of women's full humanity, experience, value and potential.<sup>47</sup> For these people in particular, can those traditional parts of the Christian narrative such as the metaphor of Hebrew marriage or the redeemed bride subordinate to her husband be helpful in imaging the human relationship to God? Are they edifying today when women are only just beginning to gain parity

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<sup>46</sup> Opportunities for inclusive language in the Eucharist are limited where traditional liturgies are in use. Nevertheless, I have found that there are possibilities in the sermon, in the preacher's invocation directly before the sermon, in the intercessions and before the final blessing.

<sup>47</sup> Fran Porter explores this theme in her interviews with female church members in Northern Ireland, where women have been ordained as priests since 1990. (Porter 2004:102) Whilst agreeing that religious structures can be anti-feminist, Schussler Fiorenza acknowledges that millions of women who actively participate in their faith. She comments: 'for millions of wo/men religion still provides a framework of meaning that is not just alienating and abusive but also self-affirming and liberating.' (Fiorenza 1998:27)

as full members of the Body of Christ in the sense of being acknowledged as representing the divine, of entering the holy spaces and of exercising leadership and authority? Are these images so freighted with adverse connotations that they deplete rather than enrich the notion of the Body of Christ when represented by the woman priest? These are questions which I now address in the context of a developing theology of women's priesthood.



## CHAPTER 5

### IMAGO DEI – THE WOMAN PRIEST

***‘Through him you have created all things from the beginning, and formed us in your own image’***

In this chapter I propose an alternative imaginary for speaking of the human created in *imago Dei* and represented by the woman priest. I suggest ways in which the notion of *imago Dei* contributes to, and draws doctrinal and ethical implications from, a theology of women’s priesthood.

#### ***The Woman Priest And The Story Of The Same***

The aspects of Christian history outlined previously can be interpreted in terms of Irigaray’s theory as the dominant religious imaginary’s ‘story of the same’, whereby the central male principle is defined by the feminine ‘other’, the binary opposite, who herself is identity-less. Women are bereft of any space to occupy, since language offers only masculine concepts of subjectivity. Until the last decade, the phallogentric domination of the religious imaginary was reinforced in the Anglican Church by an all-male priesthood. A damning analysis of the historical misogyny at the heart of the Christian tradition is made by theologian and philosopher Mary Daly. In *Beyond God The Father: Toward a Philosophy Of Women’s Liberation* she comments, with reference to the relationship between patriarchal power structures and the construct of the omnipotent masculine divine, that: ‘If God is male, then the male is god’. (Daly 1986:19) Women have no place in the religious imaginary, language or culture: they ‘have been unable even to experience their own experience’. (1986:12)

Where sexual difference is ignored, the feminine/female insight into the divine is lost. Evolving feminist theologies have assumed that the divine will is to liberate all peoples from practising or suffering oppression and from false identities imposed by cultural conventions. However, in relation to gender, such a process has to overcome countless generations of tradition based on a masculinist imaginary that ignores sexual difference. And where gender meets religion, these assumptions are particularly trenchant. They impose on women and men a range of gendered expectations, assigning, as Anne Belford Ulanov puts it, ‘prepackaged psychological characteristics, social roles and legal definitions exclusively to one sex or another’ (Ulanov 1981:34). Thus individuals of both sexes are subject to cultural expectations derived from a generalised understanding of the feminine/female and masculine/male.<sup>1</sup> The problem within

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<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that such cultural conditioning has been at the root of the distrust, even fear, of feminism evident since the beginnings of the movement. Margaret Forster points out that many women today still react with anything from apathy to hate towards the term feminism. Forster attributes a negative reaction to misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the term, causing the ‘most attractive and peaceful of doctrines’ to seem like an ‘aggressive, destructive movement which aims at making neuters of us all’. (Forster 2004:1)

Fran Porter reports that many women she interviewed in Northern Ireland were resistant, if not hostile, to feminism, often because it was seen as incompatible with Christianity.

the Church, as Ulanov sees it, is that religious tradition has limited women, discouraging their way of knowing and 'pressurising them to imitate men rather than to bring their own particular presence'. (Ulanov 1981:76)

The historic monopoly of men over holy spaces and rituals, and of male-dominated religious language and liturgy, bears witness to the notion of male ascendancy in imaging the divine. The (until very recently) all-male priesthood, in reflecting and encouraging this notion, reinforced the traditional belief that only the male priest could function *in persona Christi*. An exclusively male priesthood acting in the person of Christ perpetuated the essentialist paradigm within which only maleness was associated with divinity, and in which men only were able to mediate sacramental grace and to fulfil the ministry of incarnating Christ for the priesthood of the whole Church. By contrast, those who accept women's priesthood understand that the priest represents Christ not by any natural, biological or physiological resemblance but by a sacramental sign which is a symbol. Just as the Eucharist symbolically signifies the Passion of Christ, so the priest symbolically signifies both Christ and the Church.

Avoidance of a literal, biological interpretation of the term *in persona Christi* has allowed for the uncovering of new potential for the meaning of ministerial priesthood as representative embodiment of the corporate Church.<sup>2</sup> This new symbolic potential is epitomised by the priest presiding at the celebration of the Eucharist, a powerfully resonant affirmation of the inclusive nature of the kingdom and of the Body of Christ. The liturgy affirms that there is no hierarchy amongst those who receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ; no-one stands superior to another at the altar. All, through grace, are equally received as children of God and members of Christ's Body the Church. All believers are welcome at the Table, because all in Christ are created and called to the promise of full personhood in the image of God. In the recitation of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest on behalf of the universal Church remembers the redeeming work of Christ, and recalls the original assurance and eschatological promise of *imago Dei*, anticipating the final and complete union of Christ the Bridegroom with his Church the Bride. Here the priest makes present the

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(Porter 2004:20) In her study of eight early feminist pioneers, such as Elizabeth Blackwell and Emily Davies, Forster illustrates time and again the difficulties these women experienced 'because the conflict between being feminine and feminist seemed unavoidable'. (2004:6)

Fiorenza notes the reluctance among scholars to be identified with feminism, since 'the term continues to be both contested and shunned as either too political or too ideological by those scholars who profess value neutrality and a positive ethos of inquiry' (Fiorenza 1998:3)

Ruether comments that in some parts of Europe, including Spain and Italy, the word 'feminism' is virtually banned from theological faculties, whilst in Eastern European areas where churches are recovering from half a century of underground survival, feminist theology is 'barely discussable'. (Ruether 1998:202-203)

<sup>2</sup> Throughout its history, there has been a range of doctrine within the Anglican Church about the representative nature of the priesthood *in persona Christi*. Generally, the doctrine of representation is strongest at the Anglo-Catholic end of the spectrum; hence the objection against women priests by those who favour a literal interpretation of the term.

reconciling action of Christ for all creation and represents all members of the Church regardless of any distinction, including gender. Such a reconciliation includes liberation from any state of presumed ontological impurity or inferiority arising from an essentialist interpretation of gender, race, class or other difference.

At the same time, however, as Irigaray and Jantzen have shown, women have been left without subjectivity, exiled to an identity-less blind spot caused by denial of difference and repression of the material and maternal. Yet, since the Eucharist affirms the redemption of all people, women and men, it must be possible for women to create a space for the female to be acknowledged, equally with the male, in *imago Dei*. It seems to me that the key here is to acknowledge and explore the principle of difference whilst simultaneously avoiding any reiterations of sexual stereotyping or essentialisms. Irigaray, we have seen, posits a fundamental transformation in the western symbolic in relation to gender and religion, so as to allow for the possibility of a feminine/female symbolic. Philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva is similarly concerned with gender as interpreted by psychoanalytic theory and practice. Like Irigaray, she is also informed by Christian (in her case Orthodox) religion. She shares with Irigaray a concern with the quest of both sexes for an appropriate fulfilment through the possibility of 'an acknowledgement of what is irreducible, of the irreconcilable interest of both sexes in asserting their differences'. (Kristeva 1987a:262)

Kristeva observes that cultures (as well as individuals) exclude the maternal and feminine. This is evident, she argues, in Israel's purity and dietary codes, which distinguish Israel from nearby cults through abomination of substances associated with sacrificial killing and the maternal body. (Kristeva 1982:90-112) She diverges from Irigaray in arguing that 'it is not possible to say of a *woman* what she is (without running the risk of abolishing her difference)'; (Kristeva 1987a:234) therefore women must necessarily continue to access the symbolic order through the father. In contrast to Irigaray, she resists any identification of woman and the feminine/female with biological women, and any potential collapse of language into biology. (Tong 1989:229) Consequently she regrets any feminist call for a separate language for women that has 'cut all ties with the language of so-called phallic communication'. (1987a:116)

In Beattie's reading of Kristeva, women's subjectivity will be gained not through rehabilitation of the maternal relationship but through the necessary oedipal stage with its abjection of the mother and its legacy of yearning and loss, a 'precondition for the individual's entry into the symbolic'. (Beattie 2006:217) All abjection – that which has been marginalized or repressed by culture - is, for Kristeva, 'recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language or desire is founded.' (Kristeva 1982:5)<sup>3</sup> The individual is haunted by a sense of alienation and dividedness, whereby the sense of a rational, autonomous self is sustained by the suppression of cultural, racial and sexual otherness. This crisis

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela Anderson defines abjection in terms of Kristeva's psycholinguistics as occurring 'with the splitting of the self, most fundamentally in the separation from the nascent self's bodily identification with the mother', prior to the emergence of language and the self's formation of identity as a unitary subject. (Anderson 1998:209)

of identity that leads to cultures of repression and domination can be addressed, Kristeva argues, without the inevitability of violent conflict caused by the masculine subject's repression of the bodily, maternal other. In her later work she looks to the role that religion plays in the development of subjectivity, particularly in balancing a psychoanalytic approach with a Christian theology of love, quintessentially expressed in the Eucharist. The assimilation of Christ's body and blood can, according to Kathleen O'Grady's critique of Kristeva, be understood as 'a symbolic representation for the individual, an epiphanic re-enactment of subjective formation'. (O'Grady 2004:164) By going beyond the signifying duality of sexual difference and an essentialising concept of woman, subjectivity can be understood as a relationship process where difference operates outside categories such as race and sex: 'I am in favour of a concept of femininity which would take as many forms as there are women.' (Kristeva 1987b:114)

Irigaray and Kristeva differ in their deconstruction of the ontology and ontogeny of the feminine/female; yet for both, the difference that accompanies gender is of key significance to subjectivity. Recognition of the multiplicity of feminine/female experience and expression within the universal category of difference is necessary if Christian feminist theology is to reflect truly the concrete lives of all women. The quest, in aspiring towards women's full subjectivity, if women are to become real, embodied subjects, must be to find a purposeful and healing way to respond to sexual difference that allows for this multiplicity: that is, a new conceptual framework that does not ignore or impoverish the feminine/female in all its diversity. Beattie argues that sexual difference is the key to the woman interpreter creating a space for herself 'with her own unique revelatory potential and as interpreting agent of her own symbolic narratives'. (Beattie 1993:44)

Beattie goes on to explore the potential of sexual difference in western theology through the figure of the Virgin Mary. I argue here that an alternative route for exploring the transformative potential of sexual difference in the Anglican tradition is through the development of a theology of women's priesthood. For the Roman Catholic, embedded in Marian spirituality, Mary offers a rich vein for such an exploration. Indeed Kristeva defines Christianity as a refined symbolic construct in which femininity is focused on 'maternity', (Kristeva 1987:234) and charts the portrayal of the maternal at the core of the Christian religion through the history of the imagery of the Virgin Mary in art. She questions whether the blossoming of feminism in Protestant countries might be due to the women's greater freedom in social and ritual matters, or whether this blossoming was the result of 'a *lack* in the Protestant religious structure with respect to the Maternal'. (1987:242) Kristeva notes the bipolar paths that have been taken by Christianity. Whilst relying on a mother goddess, it has either developed the cult of the maternal in the 'reassuring wrapping in the proverbial mirage of the mother'; (1987:252) or it has privileged the Word, 'overwhelming the symbolic weakness where [the Mother] takes refuge...with an overabundance of discourse'. (1987:253)

For the Roman Catholic, the unconfined, ambivalent maternal body, beyond the impotence of language, is focussed on the image of the Virgin Mary. For the Anglican, for whom Mary does not generally occupy such a central symbolic

position,<sup>4</sup> I suggest the woman priest is a possible symbolic locus for the maternal, for the sacramentality of the female body, of nature and emotion, indeed all those elements that have been associated with the feminine/female when set in opposition to the masculine/male. As the priesthood of both women and men becomes fully accepted and normative, it may be that the age-old dualistic notions of theomorphism will be undermined. Where the woman priest is allowed to flourish as a graced symbolic locus of the feminine/female in *imago Dei*, then culture, reason and mind can no longer be seen as superior to and set over against nature, emotion and body. With the ordination of the first women priests, clergy and congregations are now faced – at least at an unconscious level - with an apparent anomaly. A woman, the identity-less other, associated with the material, corporeal and maternal, now represents the utterly transcendent divine, the Godhead, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here is a collision of signifiers that may seem irreconcilable. Indeed, a rejection of the validity of women's priesthood is of course a possible response. An alternative response must involve a paradigm shift in the religious imaginary so as to incorporate the feminine/female within the divine, not by the sterile and oppressive perpetuation of binary opposites but through a recognition of the primacy of sexual difference.

A priesthood that includes women cannot ignore sexual difference: the entire religious imaginary, in which the priesthood plays an important part, is itself now subject to transformation. Irigaray stresses the redemptive potential of sexual difference where sexuate identity is allowed to flourish. To more fully recognise likeness to the divine in the feminine/female as well as in the masculine/male is to open up hitherto unknown horizons in our religious imaginary. To follow Irigaray, women's mission to achieve subjectivity involves coming out of silence and finding a bridge, a fecund point of mediation, between body, language and the divine, between male and female. In this case, does not the woman priest offer such a mediation – a sensible transcendental - not least in pointing up the sacramental significance of the female body, of the maternal, the bridal, and in further excavating the central symbols of the Eucharist, including incarnation, sacrifice and redemption? As Irigaray argues, we must reopen

the figures of discourse...in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, to make them 'render up' and give back what they owe the feminine. (Irigaray 1985:74)

Irigaray is hopeful that the transformation in culture necessary for women to acquire subjectivity is possible. I contend that the advent of women's priesthood has brought such a cultural transformation somewhat closer, since it has revealed the need for a shift in our religious imaginary to accommodate the feminine/female aspects of the divine and the divine within the feminine/female. I argued earlier that Irigaray's notion of the sensible transcendental allows women to find an identity and symbolic representation, mediating the divine not

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<sup>4</sup> A joint statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, 'Mary: Grace And Hope In Christ' (2004) acknowledges differences in attitudes to and beliefs about Mary in the two households of faith. The preface states that 'we have had to face squarely dogmatic definitions which are integral to the faith of Roman Catholics but largely foreign to the faith of Anglicans.' (2004:1)

through the male imaginary but rather through their own embodied and sexuate nature. Thus the sensible transcendental can, as Beattie points out, be a resource for a sacramental theology which acknowledges our experience of the divine in the bodily realities of human sexuality, desire and fecundity, whilst also recognising that God is infinitely Other. (Beattie 2006:127)

Now that the priesthood incorporates women, then woman, the feminine/female, must be acknowledged as able to mediate the divine. And if the feminine/female is indeed such a graced locus of being, then those elements associated with the feminine/female must be included within the radius of that locus. Hence the historic assumption that masculinity, with its associated elements of rationality and reason are nearer to the divine than femininity, is undercut by the woman priest. Concurrently, nature, corporeality, emotion and sexuality, all traditionally associated with the feminine/female, are affirmed in their sacramental significance, and can no longer be ignored or undervalued as nontheomorphic.

Moreover, the divine itself can no longer be seen in terms of sexual polarities: God is both male and female, neither male nor female, and the dynamic is primarily one not of binary opposites but of equality in difference. The absurdity of excluding women from the divine and the need for a feminine/female symbolic within the religious imaginary thus becomes more evident. The woman priest gives embodied expression to what has hitherto been ignored, repressed and denied in a masculinist spirituality burdened with maternal forgetfulness. In other words, she has begun to fill some of those lacunae left by the hitherto masculinist symbolic order, and demands the recognition of and respect for sexuate identity proper to each gender. The woman priest representing both God and the Body of Christ at the altar is a sign of the beginning of a transformation of human subjectivity away from repression and exclusion and towards acceptance and incorporation of the feminine/female as of sacramental significance, mediating the divine in the created world. And since she is representative of the Body of Christ, the sign pertains not just to her, but to the entire believing community for whom, through the presence of the woman priest, the feminine/female religious symbolic has been re-membered and re-enlivened.<sup>5</sup>

The result is not only new hope and new creativity, but also (for some people more than others) uncertainty and risk: if the entire religious imaginary is destabilised, then so is our own identity as creatures of God. What happens to God-talk and worship when the divine is affirmed as being reflected in the feminine/female as much as in the masculine/male? Indeed, how can the divine be approached in terms of women's bodiliness and physiological functions? What happens when women and men affirm that God is revealed in those feminine traits in personality and makeup as much as in masculine traits? How

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Ross is among those Roman Catholic women who have written about their pain at the current lack of women priests, particularly at the Eucharist, where the message is still given that women cannot fully represent Christ. She writes of groups of women who meet together to share bread and wine, yet miss connecting with the universal Church. She argues that the ordination of women 'would be a recognition of the fundamental equality of the sexes before God and in the Church and in the sacrality of the human body'. (Ross 1993:204)

can the narratives of faith be re-interpreted with regard to sexual difference and recognition of the feminine/female within the divine? How should the Church respond to the recognition that it is in the mutuality and reciprocity of female and male that people come to full personhood in the image of God? How does this open up the image of the divine, and of human identity in *imago Dei*? These are all questions that have surfaced in an explicit way since the ordination of women, whose priesthood calls for a fresh reflection on the identity of the Church and of individual believers. A process of re-discovery of *imago Dei* is not a comfortable journey.

### ***Maternity And Natality Within The Religious Imaginary***

Although the advent of the woman priest may herald a transformation in the religious imaginary, it is impossible presently to imagine its morphology, other than by being alert to the lacunae in the present masculinist symbolic order. We can only imagine the unimaginable in terms of the unthought and the unsymbolised. I suggest, however, that the woman priest can begin to enable the female body to be recognised as a graced locus of being – although what this process might reveal is unknowable. There can be no conjecture on a possible future female symbolic, other than perhaps to speculate that such a symbolic, in privileging difference, will continue to play on the fluidity of sexual imagery around the divine and the Church, whilst re-membering the corporeal and maternal signifiers of the divine associated with the feminine/female. God-talk can only refer ultimately to what is not known, so maternal and paternal analogies are of course only ever symbolic. However, as Lacanian psychoanalysis has shown, maternal analogies, with their attendant corporeal, embodied language, address something of the sense of loss and separation associated both with the Mother and with God.

Symbol and language grounded in maternal images are promoted by Irigaray in her vision of a female subjectivity built around female genealogy, and adopted by Jantzen in promoting the concepts of natality and flourishing. Irigaray contends that the spiritual dimension of maternity, hitherto colonised by masculine culture, needs to be re-found – a task, she says, ‘perhaps easier to imagine than to carry out’. (Irigaray 1993b:117) Jantzen argues that the need for a female symbolic is urgent, but that this must come about at the level of contextualised experience and imagination rather than of theory. (Jantzen 1998:78) Beattie criticises both Irigaray and Jantzen, however, for not concretising their proposals within the practice and worship of a faith community. She finds that although Irigaray appeals to Christian symbols and doctrines, she ‘abstracts them from their bodily significance in the context of a performative narrative of faith’. (Beattie 2006:96) Doing philosophy rather than theology leaves Irigaray, using language severed from its religious roots, without the ‘incarnate, sacramental function of the Catholic symbolism to which she refers’. (2006:96) She criticises Jantzen for not exploring further ‘the implications of this for the kind of religious imaginary that she is proposing.’ (2006:255) How, she asks, in Jantzen’s pantheistic, immanentist religious imaginary, devoid of truth claims of doctrine, is a revolution in thought and practice to be obtained? ‘Who’, she asks, ‘is to mediate between the academy and the lives of ordinary women and men seeking this more life-affirming religion?’ (2004:119-20)

Beattie also finds Jantzen's work lacking in an examination of differences between Protestant and Catholic responses to the symbolic potential of maternity and natality. The need for a feminist deconstruction and reclamation of the Marian dimension of Catholicism is compared by Beattie to the 'austere masculinism of much mainstream Protestantism', with its 'denials of desire, embodiment and maternity'. (Beattie 2006:509/10) She suggests that Jantzen's proposed religious imaginary might well arc from philosophy to theology so as to transform a sacramental, maternal ecclesiology and so inform the liturgy and practice of believing communities. She goes on to ask how maternal feminine symbols, hitherto lacking embodiment in Roman Catholic sacramentality and liturgy, can retrieve meaning. Similarly, she argues that Irigaray's writing, 'embodied and embedded within the sacramental life of the Church, might help us to recognize anew what heaven might be'. (2006:289)<sup>6</sup> I suggest that in the Anglican Church the need for realising the transformation that Jantzen posits is met within the beliefs, practices and rites of an existing tradition in the form of the woman priest. She symbolises both God (who is both/neither male and female, father, mother and son) and the Church, variously symbolised as both bride, body and mother.<sup>7</sup> She brings to corporeal reality the feminine maternal symbols that have been lacking in a male-only priesthood, and thus inaugurates that revolution in religious thought and practice that has hitherto been limited to the academy.

The symbolism around gender, the Church and the divine is highly relational and inter-dependent but also fluid; as Beattie remarks, 'there is something about gender and God that refuses to stand still'. (Beattie 2006:526) Yet the polysemic nature of religious symbols readily lends itself to their reconstruction with a view to the quest for women's subjectivity through a female divine. The instability of these symbols – God as midwife as well as king, for instance – points to the insufficiency of a dualistic system of binary opposites and to the primacy of difference. It may be impossible to imagine a religious symbolic that is not grounded in such a dualistic system; but Irigaray provides some pointers as to how such a symbolic would appear. We have seen that her vision privileges the mother/daughter bond, and that such images would supplement those of fathers and sons as an inspirational horizon for women. There would be symbolic representation of the maternal (including the intra-uterine bond) that would help women to situate themselves within a female genealogy. I have argued (chapter 2) that the woman priest particularly represents the 'birthing' role of priesthood in helping others to be 'born' into the spiritual life and to mature as members of the Body of Christ. I have also suggested that Jantzen's concept of natality, in conjunction with that of the female divine horizon, is useful

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<sup>6</sup> Irigaray herself acknowledges Roman Catholicism as her cultural tradition, whose dogmas she has for years tried to navigate. At one time distanced from them, she writes recently that she has 'come back to them, but to question and no longer to submit blindly.' (Irigaray 2004:150)

<sup>7</sup> I barely touch upon the Church as mother here. Although acknowledged in the calendar on Mothering Sunday, the notion of the Holy Mother Church is, I suggest, not widely adhered to or explored in the religious practice of the Anglican Church. It does, however, inform the consciousness of some writers with a Roman Catholic background to whom I refer in this study, including Irigaray and Lacan.



in exploring the collision that occurs between the woman priest and current religious symbol and narrative within the context of the Eucharist. Jantzen asks how our symbolic and social order would change if our *gestalt* were shaped as much by an imaginary of natality as of mortality.

Does a reading of feminine/female aspects of the divine within Christian faith narratives help to reveal/re-member a latent female religious symbolic? Images of the maternal divine are present in Scripture, although they have not been highly developed in the masculinist environment of Protestantism. Would not the promotion of maternal divine images give expression to sexual difference within the priesthood, and thence to all within the faith community? Are not the feminine/female aspects of the divine, together with human sexual difference, evidently acknowledged in a priesthood of two equal sexes? Such a priesthood therefore promotes women's subjectivity, giving voice to the voiceless, since women coming to speech is a corollary of women becoming subjects.

Perhaps there is a danger here that, in seeking women's subjectivity through feminine/female aspects of the divine, women might aspire only to those characteristics that have traditionally been associated with the feminine/female. Ulanov cautions that

To call feminine only those qualities of compassion and nurture traditionally associated with women omits essential pieces of a woman's reality – power, intellect, aggression. (Ulanov 1981:15)<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, those characteristics traditionally associated more with women should be (and increasingly are) valued and celebrated, albeit alongside others, including those listed by Ulanov, that women may in the past have been inculturated to eschew. As Ulanov points out, such symbols 'can be added to – not subtracted from or substituted for – the masculine, to give us our understanding of what it is to be human'. (Ulanov 1981:22) Tillich argues that the truth of a religious symbol lies in its ability adequately to express 'the correlation of some person with final revelation'. (1953:266) Does not the priesthood of two sexes which recognises sexual difference offer a more valid symbol, in a culture now seeking women's subjectivity, of God who is both and neither female and male? Tillich goes on to show how, by using the term 'Father' as a symbol for God, not only is God brought down to the human relationship of father and child, but also the theonomous, sacramental depth of fatherhood is revealed. Does not the maternal divine, symbolised particularly by the woman priest, reveal the theonomous and sacramental depth of the maternal and of the feminine/female, so that women as much as men can come to realise through worship something of what it means to be made in the image of the divine? The historic emphasis on an androcentric understanding of rationality in relation to the divine has largely excluded women. Yet surely the metaphor of maternity and natality affirms woman as also a valid mediator of the divine image.

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<sup>8</sup> Bynum, writing about the religious significance of food to medieval woman, notes that the reception of nurture was seen as a male activity, whilst the provision of nurture was a female one. (1987:277) This observation, I suggest, has remained true since, although moderated in recent years, for instance by men in western society taking on a greater child-caring role within the family.

## **Maternal Divine Images**

Certain aspects of God the creator and sustainer come sharply into focus when the symbolic of natality is mapped onto the feminine/female mirror to the divine. In *Redeeming The Dream: Feminism, Redemption And Christian Tradition*, Mary Grey seeks to show that feminist theology is centred on redemption in the sense of reclaiming what has been lost, and on this basis explores a new model of redemption and atonement. She notes that, at the time of writing in the late 1980s, 'the psychological and spiritual implications of the birth-giving experiences of women have never been explored as a resource for official theology'. (Grey 1989:140) Grey sees the metaphor of birth-giving, derived from the biological function of the womb, as a female function that clearly symbolises aspects of the divine; yet it seems to Grey to be under-explored and undervalued.<sup>9</sup> Grey uses the idea of the 'birthing of God' as 'the creative energy for wholeness and transformation ceaselessly at work in creation, to which much of the experience of women bears witness'. (1989:138) Fran Porter similarly associates birthing with divine creativity when she argues that

a Christian understanding which finds theological resonance with the creativity of God in the experience of childbearing and rearing, sees the creation and nurture of children as part of being human, and as such among the possibilities of what it means to be in the image of God. (Porter 2004:88)

This is not to imply that women who do not possess a womb or who have not given birth or do not want to become mothers are somehow lacking in perceived feminine/female traits.<sup>10</sup> Assumptions about what is feminine/female and about motherhood have so far largely been shaped by the male imaginary. Beattie remarks that: 'Women are only at the beginning of reflecting on motherhood from a position of educated self-awareness and critical distance from traditional family values'. (Beattie 2003:215) Moreover, those who are mothers have not all shared a common experience. A woman's relationship to childbirth is shaped by discourses of gender, reproduction, maternity, technology and so on, and is not simply biologically defined. The womb in this context is not used simply to describe an organ that nurtures a foetus to full term. Rather, as Una Kroll writes, it connotes

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<sup>9</sup> Grey discusses the danger of conflating the woman's biological function of reproduction with an essentialist definition of woman in *The Wisdom of Fools?* (1993: 32 – 47)

<sup>10</sup> Some within the feminist debate, particularly within second wave feminism (for example Shulamith Firestone) see reproduction and mothering as an oppressive burden on women, from which technology can release them. Jane Freedman comments that 'the women's movement articulated an implicitly, if not explicitly, negative evaluation of motherhood for many years before it was able to articulate the positive side'. (Freedman 2001:71) This was in part a reaction against the argument of biology used by nineteenth-century anti-feminists. As Margaret Forster puts it: 'Nature decreed that women should bear and suckle children. This being so women were going against nature of they did not fulfil their natural function'. (Forster 2004:241)

an amalgam of elements in a woman's life which give her the ability to describe herself as a woman... a woman with a particular perspective on life because of her nature. (Kroll 1987:94)

This, for Kroll, means also a God-centred perspective since 'she is created in God's image'. (1987:94)<sup>11</sup> Moreover, every living person has been born of a woman, has started life in a womb and survived the passage to birth. Although we do not remember our intrauterine life, the womb carries weighty symbolic significance.

The natural seasons and intimacy with regeneration associated with the womb are prolific in connotations of God's self-revelation through the rhythms of the created cosmos. A woman's life is rich with the repetitions of what Kristeva calls the 'cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrences of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature'. (quoted in Moi 1986:191) The psalmist praises this creator God who bids all living things flourish according to seasons governed by the sun and moon (Ps.104); and the writer of Ecclesiastes teaches that all people are subject to the times and seasons that God has determined (Ecc 3). The periodicity evident in women's life-cycle bears God's image, in Kroll's words, 'in a dynamic way', enabling her 'to be in tune with other rhythms in creation which are also in tune with that aspect of God's creativity'. (Kroll 1987:94) The creator and sustainer God is the God of fecundity and creative potential, who forges and brings forth an infinite succession of new life in the material cosmos. Creation is not a once-for-all-time, single event but an ongoing process through which God sustains the living world by giving life to each succeeding generation of creatures. Women embody these divine procreative qualities in their generative power, bringing each new generation to birth in a continual cycle of procreation.

Irigaray mourns the lack in western culture of an imaginary and symbolic of life in the womb, the first nourishing earth, first water, first *corps-a-corps* with the mother. (1993c:14-15) Since it has not been conceptualised as a primal place in which we become body, Irigaray argues, it has been phantasized as a devouring mouth and a sewer. Yet the womb, the human crucible of new life, surely offers an eloquent image of God who nurtures life and brings to birth. The still and patient God has waited through aeons whilst the earth nurtures new life in the evolution of ever more intricately and finely balanced ecosystems that are in tune with every fluctuation of the earth's atmosphere and climates. Similarly, the pregnant woman experiences the stillness and patience of the long period of waiting-time, as her body nourishes the embryo into life and vigour.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> The obverse of this reasoning is that feminine/female qualities of birthing, nurturing and so on are so often relegated to a subordinate position in a dualistic context, so that within a hierarchical gender system they are undervalued and overlooked as being in the likeness of the divine. This issue is explored by Fran Porter in her interviews with Christian women. (Porter 2004:chap.4)

<sup>12</sup> We might also fruitfully link the waiting required by pregnancy to the waiting for the Lord. Alexander Ryrie describes this experience in some detail, noting the accompanying emotions of passionate yearning, humility, silent and trustful acceptance, and also protest and frustration. He gives examples of these emotions expressed whilst waiting for the Lord in the psalms. (Ryrie 1999:74-77)

woman waiting in expectation for the birth of her child becomes a vivid metaphor for the whole cosmos, the body of God, groaning in labour as it anticipates the birth of the new heaven and new earth (Rom 8:22; Rev 21:1). The womb may also be understood to symbolise the creative power of God at an individual level. Kroll writes movingly of her journey towards faith as a process of dwelling within God's womb. (Kroll 1987:93) It was an image to which, because of the traditional patriarchal education she received, she was initially resistant:

Yet, in the darkness, the warmth, the sense of movement towards light, the sense of being born were all there if only I would dare to let go and enter the experience of being in God's womb ready to be born again and become what God wanted me to be. (Kroll 1987:92)

The intimate love and care evident in this image is an ancient theme. There are many instances of authors in scripture making an association between the womb and the love a mother has for her child, and linking this with God's love for humankind. The Hebrew words for 'womb' (*rehem*) and for God's compassion or covenant love (*rahamim*) come from the same verb, 'to have compassion' (*rhm*). (Hilkert 1997:184) Of course, compassion is a trait not confined exclusively to the feminine/female. Neither does this trait exclude from the feminine/female other contrasting traits, often traditionally thought of as 'unfeminine'. Nevertheless, references to God's mercy using this derivation – there are thirteen in the Old Testament – carry a connotation of motherly love, and so are inherently associated with the feminine/female. Jonah, for example, speaks of God as 'gracious and compassionate' (4:2), as does the psalmist (Psalm 86:15).

The passage from the womb into the world reflects the process of new birth experienced by all who become members of the Body of Christ. Jesus uses the powerful metaphor of people being born again to depict their entry into the life of faith (John 3:3). Indeed, in the rite of baptism, as a baby emerges from the waters of the womb to take its first breath, so the neophyte emerges from water to signify entry into their new life in Christ. The narrative repeated at every Eucharist proclaims that Jesus reveals God to the world, and reconciles the world to God. So as all human beings image the divine, all of us, through Christ, can be reconciled to our creator through the gift of new birth in Christ.<sup>13</sup> And all church members, priest and people alike, are 'mothers' in nurturing others to new life in Christ. Similarly, the pregnant mother nurtures and sustains the growing foetus until the moment of birth into the world. The moment of new birth for the Christian comes about only through the suffering and death of Christ, who endured crucifixion so that the Church might be born. For any pregnant mother, birth is potentially a hazardous time that involves a degree of suffering and the risk of her own death for the sake of her child. Bringing forth new life is costly, yet with a successful delivery, agony is overtaken by joy. Jesus used the notion of a woman's journey through pain to joy during the birth of her child as a simile for the transition his disciples would experience after his resurrection.

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<sup>13</sup> Noragh Jones recalls the tradition of medieval writers (among them Julian of Norwich) who wrote of Christ as the Mother labouring to bring people to spiritual birth. (Jones 1996:150)

Their grief over his death would turn to a joy that no worldly event could destroy (John 16:21).

God is the rock, the faithful supporter and friend who never deserts us, who guides us through the 'valley of the shadow of death'. (Ps 23:4). The woman in labour knows the value of the midwife and others who stay with her and talk her through the potentially dangerous time of childbirth. How telling that the old English word for such a good friend and supporter, 'godsibb', should have been reduced through subsequent years to 'gossip', the mere idle tattler.<sup>14</sup> The midwife and godsibb stand for the God who is our staunchest friend, who stays by our side through our most painful and dangerous trials. The author of the Third Isaiah pictures Yahweh as the midwife who brings to birth the new nation, Zion's child, after a period of barrenness and bereavement (Isa.66:7-9). The passage continues with a picture of the new mother nursing and carrying her baby (Isa.66:11-13), and the author uses these intimate maternal tasks to depict the love and care that Yahweh will give to Jerusalem. The psalmist similarly uses the picture of the weaned child in the embrace of its mother to describe the relationship of love and trust between himself and God (Ps 131:2).

The new life into which a convert to faith is born is one that brings moments of intense pleasure. Spiritual encounters bring a deeper experience of the self and of the world that are deeply rewarding. There is joy simply in being in the presence of God, and this in turn colours our relationships with others and with the world around us. This type of concrete pleasure is present between the mother and child as they get to know one another and enjoy each other's company as two separate but intimately connected beings. As with the new believer, the infant learns trust, confidence and self-awareness as her relationship with her mother develops.

New Christians are nourished by the spirit of God as they grow into their new-found faith. The comparison between spiritual food for neophytes and breastmilk for babies is a continuing theme in the history of the Church. Several epistles liken this spiritual nourishment to human milk. Peter writes: 'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation' (1 Pet 2:2). Benediction of neophytes in Egypt, North Africa and Rome included a chalice with milk and honey, a ritual expression, according to Berger, of the image of God as mother. (Berger 1999:38) Several patristic writers, including Augustine and Origen, describe Christ as mother. (Bynum 1982:126)

Orthodox theologian Verna Harrison has studied the way Clement of Alexandria portrays Christ as the milk of the Father, the nursing mother, and as the mother who gives birth to his people on the cross. (Harrison 2003:327) The medieval

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<sup>14</sup> 'Godsibb' (person related to one in God) was used to denote both a godmother/father or sponsor at a baptism and a woman's female friends present at childbirth. (<http://kpearson.faculty.tcnj.edu/Dictionary/gossip.htm>). In either context the notion of a loyal friend and supporter remains true. The term was applied to both men and women until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it gained negative connotations and became largely attached to women only. Modern researchers in the field of anthropology regard gossip as an important source of human social stability. ([http://www.nald.ca/province/QUE/litcent/Publication\\_Products/WPno5/15.htm](http://www.nald.ca/province/QUE/litcent/Publication_Products/WPno5/15.htm))

period, with its stress on the incarnational Christ, witnessed a renewed enthusiasm for the image of Jesus as mother, for instance in the writings of several twelfth-century male Cistercian monks and, in the fifteenth century, Julian of Norwich. (Bynum 1982:111). The medieval cult of the Sacred Heart saw God's body lactating, giving birth and, as Caroline Walker Bynum describes, 'clothing our humanness with the spotless humanness of God'. (Bynum 1987:278) Here is a direct and compelling comparison between the nurturing, maternal God and the role of the mother in sustaining the life of her infant. This association is made equally explicit in the medieval paintings shown in Bynum's book, *Holy Feast And Holy Fast: The Religious Significance Of Food To Medieval Women* (1987/8).<sup>15</sup> Pictures of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding St Bernard are juxtaposed with those of Jesus issuing blood from his side. A painting by Quirizio da Murano entitled *The Saviour* shows Jesus seated, opening a robe to expose a wound located where a nipple would normally be found, and offering a eucharistic wafer to a nun in the order of Poor Clares. The link between the nurturing qualities of God through the Eucharist and that of the mother to her baby is explicit.



Quirizio da Murano's altarpiece of the Saviour (1460-1478) Academy of Venice

The trinitarian God of self-giving love cannot be expressed or understood outside the notion of relationality; similarly, the family of the Church can exist only in community, its members living in loving relationship to God and to one

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<sup>15</sup> [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Savior\\_-\\_Quirizio\\_da\\_Murano.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Savior_-_Quirizio_da_Murano.jpg) (accessed 14.05.07).

another. The primacy of relationship is witnessed in the bond between mother and child. The mother, very often the bonding force within a family, witnesses to this aspect of the divine. Even in first-world societies it is still usually the mother who is the main home-maker and carer, so that she is often the lynchpin of family life and relationships, whatever her particular family makeup might be. It is also usually the mother who is the main carer of the very young. The mother who feeds and comforts her baby engages in a loving intimacy that precedes the development of spoken language. Before a child ever learns to speak, she has absorbed from her mother the language of the tender touch, the ready smile, the twinkling eye, the soft hand on her skin, the gentle nonsense words that say nothing in particular but convey a relationship of security and love. Is this shared, intimate world of mother and child not an apt image of the relationship between ourselves and the still small voice of God who speaks to us, not only in the noisy and dramatic but, as Elijah discovered, in the quiet whisper (1 Kin 19:12); or, as Jesus demonstrated with Jairus' daughter, in the gentle healing hand (Luke 8:54)?<sup>16</sup>

The religious experience enables the recognition of a personal, deep-rooted value that springs from the recognition of otherness. I become aware of myself as a human being and also of the presence of something other than myself, distinct from me but in some way like myself (such as the quiet whisper that Elijah heard). Through this awareness of the other I come to self-understanding. This capacity to recognise the other begins, according to Ulanov, with 'a mother's recognition of the otherness of her child'. (1981:90) Like the religious experience, the mother-child relationship is inward and personal, and in both a sense of value is conferred, so that the recipients are given a sense of self-worth. We give back in worship the love that has been gifted to us by the divine. The child similarly learns a sense of her own distinctiveness, otherness and value by the recognition of the other given by her mother.<sup>17</sup>

I have touched on Lacan's work on the role of language in the formation of the unconscious and in the acquisition of sexual identity. The function of the carer, usually the mother, in the formation of identity and of language is crucial. One of the first words a child speaks will be her word for 'mother', and one of the first she understands will be her own name. By endless repetition the mother teaches her child these names, cementing their physical bond in the language of family. The binding power of names is a recurring theme in scripture: Yahweh tells Moses that He knows him by name (Ex. 13:17); Jesus the shepherd calls

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<sup>16</sup> The mother-child relationship I have described here is of course an idealised version that is glimpsed in rare moments during the course of exhaustion, irritation, frustration, anxiety and agony that accompanies real parenthood. Lionel Shriver offers an extreme exposition of the darker side of the mother-child relationship in her novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. (Shriver 2003/4) The maternal ideal, discovered in God, is in human maternal relationship always shot through with negative emotions and experiences.

<sup>17</sup> Ulanov discusses this process at some length, contrasting her view of the development of a sense of otherness with the theory of symbiosis. This theory, from which analogies to a primary religious experience have been drawn, stresses our sadness at losing our symbiotic unity with God, just as the infant feels loss at being ejected from the mother's womb. (Ulanov 1981:92-98)

his sheep by name, and each sheep knows his voice (John 10:3-4). The shepherd image tells us also of God the protector. The shepherd guards his sheep; likewise, the mother is often the primary protector of her child, first in her womb, then in her arms or on her back, keeping the child out of harm and teaching her about potential dangers. She also clears up a lot of mess – changing nappies, wiping away vomit, cleaning up blood and so on. A woman's caring role often also extends to other members of the family, particularly the sick and the elderly. She is often a teacher, carer and servant to those who depend on her. These roles are all reflective of the God revealed in Jesus, who yearned to embrace Jerusalem like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings, (Mat 23:37) and who took a towel and washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1-11).

A mother's experience of attachment is balanced by her experience of letting go. As From the moment the umbilical cord is cut, the bond between mother and child becomes in some ways a journey of separation. In a good, loving relationship there is no unhealthy attachment. Perhaps the old saying about cutting the apron strings is a bowdlerised allusion to the metaphorical severing of the umbilical cord that continues through childhood and into adult life. For the child, as Lacanian theory has shown, language masks the inexpressible loss of and need for the mother's body. Growth into maturity as a Christian is described in the Epistles as a weaning from milk to solid food (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12). The image of the child severed from the mother's umbilical cord (or apron strings!) speaks too of the need for detachment on the journey of faith. We learn through prayer to detach ourselves from desire of things, even from our attachment to our personal concept of God. As the Jesuit teacher Anthony de Mello puts it: 'Sometimes you have to get rid of 'God' in order to find God. Lots of mystics tell us that'. (do Mello 1990:139)

God the rock, the nourisher and supporter is also the God of death and loss. Every fertile woman experiences the potential within her body each month for new life, and the closing of that potential signalled by the blood of menstruation or miscarriage. Her life passage from menarche to menopause and beyond resonates both with loss and also with the birth of new possibilities. The loss of her childhood and the advent of her potential to conceive are powerfully and regularly signalled through the period of her fertility. Scripture reveals God to us through the image of Sophia, the divine wisdom by whom the Lord 'laid the earth's foundations' (Prov 3:19). The mature woman knows not only the loss of generative power and but also the potential of growth into the wisdom of the crone. Kroll writes of her post-menopausal experiences as a 'new-found freedom' that has led her to a delight in savouring the present moment 'heightened by the acceptance of the inevitability of my own death' (Kroll 1987:101)

If a concept of natality is concerned with relationality, life and nurturing, then what can be said when the original blessing of loving, mutual relationship is distorted into oppression, violence and abuse? Jesus bore the curse of otherness in the ultimate abjection of being hanged on a tree (Gal.3:13). Alienation, humiliation and rejection are suffered in the heart of God incarnate who made himself fully vulnerable to the basest of human nature. Such experiences are part of the history of the feminine, and figure in the treatment of women in scripture. Dinah, daughter of Leah and Jacob, suffered rape from a man who then purported to love her (Gen. 34). Tamar had to prostitute herself



to her father-in-law in order to gain her rights as a widow (Gen. 38). The two daughters of Lot were offered by their father to be raped by the men of Sodom in order to spare Lot's male visitors the same fate. (Gen 19:10). The patriarchy that has ignored sexual difference and valued dominance and hierarchy above mutuality and connectedness has allowed tragic injustices of exploitation and abuse by the powerful over the weak and vulnerable. Women across the globe tell their own stories of 'otherness'. All too often they are violated and undervalued by societies that treat them as less than fully human.

Jesus, the man of sorrows acquainted with suffering, was not a stranger to desolation; his cry of despair from the cross, repeating words from Psalm 22, tells of an experience of utter abandonment (Mat 27:46). In scripture women are many times depicted in a state of grief, abandonment and suffering. Jeremiah portrays the northern kingdom as Rachel weeping over the children she has lost (Jer. 31:15); Jesus tells the daughters of Jerusalem to weep for themselves and for their children in anticipation of the destruction of the Temple (Luke 23:28); female disciples of Jesus follow his body to the tomb (Luke 23:55). A bereaved mother knows the agony of loss and separation that for her has particular association with her own body. Because of their relational way of being, this experience of desolation has been attributed particularly to women. (Johnson 1992:259)

As God knows suffering, God also knows righteous anger on behalf of the alien, the poor, the outcast and the stranger (Ps 146:9; Mark 11:15-17). In Proverbs and Sirach, the divine Wisdom cries out publicly in anger against the foolish and wicked (Prov 1:20-33). The Wisdom literature portrays a God who values righteousness above violence, (Prov. 3:31-35) pride and arrogance (Pro 8:13). Many women worldwide, touched by feminist arguments, now express anger against the injustice of otherness— injustice which may be in the form of a lack of parity in health care, education and employment, or in the effects of pornography, or domestic violence. Some have expressed anger about the exploitation of the earth's natural resources and the degradation of wildlife habitats, the result of a dualistic worldview that separates mind and reason from nature and emotion.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The Woman Priest: A New Religious Symbolic***

The images I have described offer rewarding potential for exploring *imago Dei* in the context of sexual difference in general and natality in particular. Many unfamiliar and under-used images of the divine and of the Church, the Body of Christ – centred around nature, bodiliness, maternity - now surface.<sup>19</sup> Bearing in mind Irigaray's argument for the redemptive potential of sexual difference and the need for sexuate identity to flourish in the process of becoming, the notions of birthing and of natality within the religious imaginary can be seen to have transformational implications in understanding human identity in the image of

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<sup>18</sup> The issues of social and environmental justice from a feminist perspective are more fully developed in chapters 7 and 8.

<sup>19</sup> Brenner points out that although references to the motherhood of God in Hebrew scripture exist (as I have shown above), they are nevertheless rare. Their existence, she cautions, should be 'neither overstated nor magnified out of proportion.' (2003:171)

God and also of the symbolic potential released by the advent of the woman priest. To mine the experience of childbearing and mothering as a resource for theological reflection might be taken as a form of gender dualism which only perpetuates androcentric, stereotypical views grounded in binary opposites. However, given the hitherto paucity of female images of the divine, reflection on the maternal helps to counter an assumption of women's non-theomorphism. As Fran Porter argues, to take the experience of motherhood as a source for theological reflection would evidence that 'Christian women are full and equal members of their faith communities'. (Porter 2004:100)

The woman priest, mediating the maternal divine, focuses attention on natality, offering a space for a feminine imaginary and symbolic that opens up divine horizons for both women and men. Particularly at the Eucharist she reconnects the Church to the divine within the ordinary and day-to-day with which the sacraments are connected and which have always been the woman's domain: preparing food, laying the table, feeding the family, washing up. In the corporeality of a priesthood of both sexes lies a reminder that the sacraments are connected with every day life. She reminds us that we can become aware of God as much in the pregnant mother or housewife as in the husband and father; in the woman seeking justice for a rape victim as much as in the king riding to battle; in the persecuted alien and outcast as much as in the conquering lord and ruler.

As an embodied representative of the feminine/female, the woman priest affirms that women equally with men are created in God's image and are capable of representing God's presence. She affirms that, in the words of Susan Ross, 'the bodies of women are as revelatory of the divine as are the bodies of men'. (Ross 1998:63) As a functional and ontological symbol of God and of the Body of Christ, she stands as witness to the potential of full selfhood of all women in the *imago Dei*. She overturns traditional, patriarchal assumptions about the normative and theomorphic nature of men and the 'otherness' and shame of women. She challenges the assumption of the masculine as superior and the feminine as inferior and subordinate, whereby women suffer from the oppression of otherness, and men suffer from the assumption of normativeness.

She affirms that the 'otherness' of the feminine/female is not a divine principle but a human construct borne of an oppressive, excluding dualism that has hitherto banished woman to a blind spot of non-subjectivity. If women, who quintessentially bear patriarchy's stamp of 'otherness', are capable of imaging the divine, then so must be all who have been regarded by patriarchy as 'other'. So the presence of the woman priest also challenges the assumption of 'otherness' according to age, race, social status, physical and mental handicap and so on. She affirms that no people are 'other' and that all without exception may stand in the presence of the divine and may approach the holy spaces and objects. Liberated also are all those who have been kept on the wrong side of 'otherness' by the rules of any culturally imposed benchmark. Archbishop Rowan Williams has argued that the ordained ministry of the Church must 'speak to the Church on behalf of the poor and excluded – and specifically of those whom the Church itself *causes* to be 'poor and excluded', to feel devalued, rejected or dehumanised'. (Williams 1984:23) The woman priest is especially well-placed to stand in solidarity not only with fellow women but with

others who feel rejected by the Church in particular as well as by society in general.

As women collectively have suffered the pain of rejection and 'otherness', so the woman priest bears the print of this wound. She will be aware of the very short span of time which has elapsed since her calling has been recognised by the Anglican Church. She will know of the numbers of women whose priestly calling until very recently was ignored. She may well have been subject in her own early calling to being overlooked, misunderstood, even ridiculed. She may herself have suffered negative comments and attitudes in her search for affirmation of her calling. In her work she may find herself treated, in the male-dominated Church hierarchy, as an honorary man rather than as a real woman with a different way of knowing and her own particular feminine attributes and gifts. She will be aware, through her own experience, of other women's lives and ministries being painfully undervalued and possibly rejected.

Ulanov claims that we deal with such pain by turning toward the wound and experiencing it consciously so that we move towards reconciliation. (Ulanov 1981:152) This way, she contends, 'women can bring the force of their caring into the world'. (1981:152) The woman priest who is aware of this pain in herself is able to relate to the unconscious pain in other people. She is thus able to reach out to others who are spiritually impoverished, lost or overlooked. Working through her own pain, she is able to offer what Ulanov calls an 'unsentimental compassion' in which her pain transforms into 'receptive awareness'. (1981:153) She is, I suggest, especially placed to empathise with those who have tried to find a place in the Church (and other institutions) but have found its masculinist imaginary and structures unwelcoming and alienating.

In evolving a distinct gendered role and ministry through the recognition of sexual difference, rather than within the current dominant gender paradigm, she will reach out to those many women who struggle to feel included within the traditional Church, those who feel, as Johnson puts it, 'subordinated in theological theory and ecclesial practice at every turn'. (Johnson 1993:26) She may also speak to those who have already left to follow other spiritual routes that more readily address their own desires and ways of knowing.<sup>20</sup> The advent of the woman priest affirms to all, and especially the excluded and marginalised, that the masculinist imaginary and patriarchal structures are not paradigmatic of Christianity itself, and that there are alternative approaches to imagining and responding to the sacred. She provides a symbolic space for a feminine imaginary and language that opens up divine horizons for both women and men. She affirms that the feminine/female is no longer only a projection of the masculine/male, and that women can now achieve a symbolic alterity that is not subsumed into the masculine. In this function, she provides an important step in reversing the effect of the 'story of the same' that ignores sexual difference, as long as she has the opportunity to find her authentic gendered being, her

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<sup>20</sup> Theology, for instance, is one such recent development, which aims to move beyond patriarchy in its reflection on the divine (the 'goddess'), and recognises how women embody the divine in their daily lives and experiences. Natalie Watson comments that theologians 'seek to overcome the trivialization and profanization of women's lives in patriarchal religions through reversing the values of these religions'. (Watson 2003:58)

identity, as both a woman and a priest. This transformation has to be made within the context of a paucity of historical landmarks or linguistic guidelines, since what has been assumed to be feminine/female has, as Ruether points out 'been constructed to complement the construction of masculinity'. (Ruether 2002:3)

Traditional scriptural symbols of the bride and the whore offer a prime example of the need to reinterpret and refigure ancient, polysemic religious symbols in order to 'hear again' a meaning valid and appropriate to our time. Some commentators believe that such images should be abandoned. Pamela Gordon and Harold C Washington, in discussing the elision of rape and military imagery in the Hebrew scriptures, argue that we must resist the equation of bad women and bad cities, and the notion that male violence metes out just punishment. They prefer to abandon for now the metaphor of the raped woman, and 'observe an honest silence'. (Gordon & Washington 1995:325) Similarly, Rachel Magdalene, mindful of the many victims of sexual abuse, argues that knowledge of the cultural and historical context of these texts is insufficient reason to continue to use them as religious metaphor today. (Magdalene 1995:352)<sup>21</sup> In the case of figures such as Gomer, Gale A Yee argues that the marriage metaphor 'makes its theological point at the expense of the real women and children who were and still are victims of sexual violence'. (Yee 1998:212)<sup>22</sup> Must this image be abandoned because of the harm such a view of women has perpetrated throughout Judaeo-Christian history? Yet how could such traditional symbols be meaningfully excised from religious narrative and memory? Even if this were possible, any such excision, as Bynum makes clear, could only have unpredictable results. (Bynum 1986:15)

A critical interpretation that will assist understanding and belief, particularly for women, is not possible, I believe, if the metaphor continues to be based on the assumption that the feminine/female is inherently subordinate to the masculine/male, less theomorphic and more prone to sin.<sup>23</sup> The woman priest, however, as I have shown, invalidates such assumptions: sexual difference must now be acknowledged and respected. In relation to Christian faith narratives, a 'double reading' must be applied in order to retrieve what has been left out by the imaginary of necrophilia. Among female images, readers must reinterpret with new insight that of Gomer and other female bride and whore figures that symbolise the unfaithfulness of God's people, and reflect, not only

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<sup>21</sup> Our current knowledge about the widespread abuse of women should at least alert us to sensitivity in using such texts. Belenky *et al* have called sexual abuse 'a shockingly common experience for women', and report from their own studies the high percentage of interviewees who were subject to 'incest, rape or sexual seduction by a male in authority.' (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1986:58-9)

<sup>22</sup> With reference to the redeemed bride, in her commentary on Hosea (1998) Yee develops the notion of the 'fruitful wife', the result of the new covenantal relationship between God and Israel, suggesting that the metaphor of fruitfulness as the (female) Wisdom of God is more healing and affirming of women.

<sup>23</sup> For some writers, the image of the bride has been irredeemably affected by patriarchy. For instance, Graetz concludes that the marriage metaphor perpetuates biblical patriarchalism into our own day, and is a 'morally flawed allegory'. (Graetz 1995:139)

on the wrong actions of the woman, but on the unfaithfulness of patriarchy itself which allowed abuse of and violence towards females to be perpetrated with impunity. A recognition of sexual difference and a subsequent 'divine fecundity' between the sexes would render such injustice inconceivable.

The woman priest, I have maintained, opens up a hitherto under-explored range of metaphors for articulating the nature of the divine. I suggest that she also opens further the exploration of divine interrelationship and the relationship between God and humankind in terms of community. In representing the divine, she draws attention to the qualities of mutuality and relationality that are associated both with women and with the perichoretic nature of the Trinity. The spirit has historically been associated with female imagery, and hence with a group that has long remained largely unnoticed and marginalised. If the Spirit retains any association with feminine/female imagery, then that imagery now has an embodied representation in the figure of the woman priest, herself a member of that loyal yet largely unacknowledged group. Here is a real, flesh-and-blood woman occupying a symbolic space previously taken solely by men. Rather than sustaining a symbolic subordination of the feminine/female in the (male) Godhead, I suggest she is occupying that space in her own right as representative both of the triune God who is neither male nor female and of all women who can, through her, attain full subjectivity in *imago Dei*.

As for sexuate differences in the way the Church echoes divine relations, we are reminded of Irigaray's assertion of the fundamental phenomenon of sexuate difference and the exclusion of the feminine/female in the homosexual imaginary. And yet, Irigaray maintains, God 'respects the difference between him and her'. (Irigaray 1993a:150) Hence, she suggests, the Trinity is a source for women and men coming to love one another. She indicates that the Trinity could be re-figured in what she terms the 'third age of the Spirit', the age of sexual difference, that beckons in the parousia. She suggests that this manifestation of God, a 'wedding between the spirit and the bride', might 'inaugurate the divine for, in, with women'. (Irigaray 1993c:62) In this third era, spirit and bride 'invite beyond genealogical destiny to the era of the wedding and the festival of the world.' (Irigaray 1984:149) She backs up her vision by referring to the appearance of several women at Pentecost. This, she suggests:

seems to say that the body of man can return to life when woman no longer forgets that she has a share in the spirit. In this way her transfiguration would take place. The moment of her glorification, finally without masochism. (Irigaray 1984:149)

The reversal of symbols has been recognized, through the discipline of anthropology, to denote a crucial moment or turning point that provides 'liminality' as boundaries are crossed. (Bynum 1987:280)<sup>24</sup> The image of the subordinate bride redeemed from harlotry is surely one of the symbols that can be reversed to provide a liminality that critiques inculturated assumptions and invites a new insight into the understanding of priesthood and the Church as the

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<sup>24</sup> Bynum, in *Holy Feast And Holy Fast: The Religious Significance Of Food To Medieval Women* (1987/8) is discussing the reversal of symbols in the context of medieval women's spirituality and particularly the spiritual symbolism of food. See chapter 10, pp.279-296.

Body of Christ. To be effective, a symbol must mould both the mind and heart as well as the behaviour of the individual and the community. In offering a particularly compelling image of the Church as the Bride of Christ, the woman priest provides the hope of transforming traditional images that are no longer socially effective because they do not represent desires or actions that are acceptable in present-day society.

The redeemed Bride of Christ is at home in her body, prepared and adorned for her husband (Rev 21:2). The woman priest, representing the Bride and the Body, witnesses to the celebration rather than to the disparagement of human beings as embodied, sensual, sexuate people. She affirms women's bodiliness, spirituality and way of knowing as of equal value to that of men's, and equally reflective of the divine. She stands as witness against the harlotry of patriarchy with its denial of the full personhood of women in *imago Dei*, a denial unfaithful to the original vision and blessing of the Creator. The reclaiming of the Bride by Christ speaks of the redemptive liberation of the female sex from unjust power structures and pejorative symbol systems, into a relationship that affirms women's inclusion and equality in the image of God. The Bride of Christ, according to Revelation, is also the Temple in which Christ lives, the City whose gates are never shut; yet nothing shameful or impure will enter (Rev 21:25-27). The woman priest witnesses to woman's overcoming of the blame of impurity and shame attached to physiological function. She affirms the imperative of working for liberation from structures that promote injustices, deny full human dignity and diminish human well-being. She challenges traditional inequalities of power which have greatly influenced Judeo-Christian cultures and which still influence relations between the sexes today. The Bride, through the redemptive work of Christ, is liberated from the shame of a patriarchal system that has kept women from subjectivity and the potential of full personhood.

Priesthood has, since the earliest times, articulated the relationship between a community and the sacred. Any symbol purporting to manifest the grace of God has to be grounded in God as validly and fully as the human imagination makes possible. If priesthood is to be a true and valid symbol manifesting God's transcendent grace, then it must aspire to represent *imago Dei* as closely as is humanly possible. A priesthood constituted solely of one sex cannot represent the divine to the extent to which humanity is fully capable. Only a priesthood of two equal genders that recognises and respects sexual difference can adequately offer the image of unity in difference that represents both the trinitarian God and the Body of Christ. If God is indeed revealed in the feminine/female as much as the masculine/male, then the presence of both these elements is essential in any endeavour to represent or image the divine. The male body by itself cannot fully symbolise the feminine/female. Through the woman priest, however, the feminine/female is no longer only a projection of the masculine/male; women can now achieve the status of symbolic recognition and alterity that is not subsumed into the masculine. The priesthood that is made up of women as well as men expresses both the feminine and masculine qualities recognised in the divine and in humanity. To the traditionally masculine attributes of, for example, potency, fatherhood, might, reason, order and physical strength represented in the priesthood, are now added feminine attributes of generativity, bringing to birth, motherhood, mystery, closeness to the earth, relationality, mutuality and vulnerability. The priesthood of men and

women together signifies both the motherhood and fatherhood of God, the Bride and Groom, the Body of Christ, the God of unity in difference.

It is wholly right – indeed essential - that the Eucharistic Prayer, offered on behalf of the universal Church, is recited by both female and male priests. Only a priesthood composed of both sexes can fully witness to the God of relation and community, feminine/female and masculine/male, women and men alike. Only such a priesthood can represent the universal Church that is Christ's Body and Bride, made up of human beings created in endless diversity and distinctiveness. The male and female priest together represent the whole of the human response to the divine in the reciprocity of the feminine/female and masculine/male and all other differences that comprise the embodied personhood of all people, female and male. Women and men serving together as priests witness also to the God-intended relationship between the sexes of mutuality and reciprocity. Neither is dominant or subordinate, neither more or less in *imago Dei*; both play an equal and vital role in being part of the Body of Christ.<sup>25</sup> The Eucharist can now fulfil its destiny as an eschatological celebration that allows all believers to affirm their own identity and hope in God as bodily, sexed beings with a shared spiritual ethos expressed in diverse ways according to individuals' ways of being in the world. In this space of gendered sacramentality all worshippers flourish at the wedding banquet in the presence of God beyond language, embodiment and gender. In communion with God through the symbolic use of the body, they experience most intimately the aspiration to become divine in a bodily participation with God. The true and full significance of the wedding feast can now unfold as the female body fully participates in the narrative of faith.

Irigaray posits the possibility of a coming era of the spirit and the bride who 'invite beyond genealogical destiny to the era of the wedding and the festival of the world' when woman will be transfigured because she will know that she has a share in the spirit. (Irigaray 1993a:149) This will be the time of 'a new parousia that necessarily accompanies the coming of an ethical God'. (1993a:150) Any woman can truly know the hope of redemption only when she knows also that she has a share in the spirit – that is, that she is truly a human person created in the image of God. Only a priesthood that adequately represents unity within sexual difference can also represent that redemption central to Christian faith that enables all people to fully find their identity in *imago Dei*.

Peter Clark, writing in 1984, spoke of an aching sense of disablement in an ordained ministry that excluded women priests. He felt a lack of women's distinctive contribution, and a conviction, among men as well as women, that 'Where my sister is not, I am not'. (Clark 1984: 181). For Clark, the all-male priesthood of the time was 'too limited to be truly representative of society at

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<sup>25</sup> Kroll makes the point that the true partnership of women and men is seen at its most obvious when ministering at the altar together. She describes the 'shocking delight' that she felt, many years before such a possibility in Britain, of witnessing a co-presidency of the Eucharist in the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York: 'I was... given an example of the marvellous partnership that was possible between men and women, each made in the image and likeness of God'. (Kroll 2001: 119)

large'. (1984:184) He also claimed that the exclusion of women caused in the Church a superficiality in self-understanding and in its God-talk, so that it was 'failing to meet the deepest needs of too many women and men'. (1984:189) Since that article was published, the Anglican Church has had the opportunity, through the presence of women priests, to acknowledge the integrity and value of all in the Body of Christ.<sup>26</sup> The woman priest has allowed for a renewal of women's and men's self-understanding and of their understanding of the divine, of the priesthood and of the Church. This renewal includes at its heart the experience of the Eucharist, where all believers come together in need and fallenness to be fed and inspired. And where the woman priest is celebrating, there is the public acknowledgement that the feminine/female is no longer neglected, undervalued or misconstrued. As we look to the Eucharist in our search for wholeness, we are assured – every one of us - that we are all created in *imago Dei* as equal creatures. Equal, that is, not in the sense of sameness, but in the sense of diversity and difference within our equal standing before God.<sup>27</sup>

In his study of Christian liturgy, Frank Senn has written that 'communities must still find ways of proclaiming and celebrating the story of Jesus of Nazareth in words and sign-acts that make this story universally accessible'. (Senn 1997:49) In our time and place, the woman priest, presiding at the Eucharist alongside her male colleagues, is surely such a sign, witnessing as it does to the equality, value and potential of all people in the image of God.

One of the universal signs in the Christian Church of the equal standing of all people before God occurs in the sharing together of the bread of the Eucharist. I now turn to the breaking of bread to consider the transformational imperative of this symbolic act for those who adhere to the Christian promise of redemption.

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<sup>26</sup> Other denominations and other Anglican Churches had already ordained women: in the Anglican Church in New Zealand, for instance, the first women priests were ordained in 1974.

<sup>27</sup> Schussler Fiorenza defines this sort of equality as 'status equivalence, equitability and parity on grounds of having diverse gifts and experiences,' a notion she aligns closely with justice. (Fiorenza 1999/03:61) These remarks are made in the context of an article lamenting the Vatican's repudiation of women's priesthood.





## CHAPTER 6

### BROKEN BODY, BROKEN WORLD – THE RECEIVED WISDOM OF CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

#### *‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you’*

In this chapter, beginning with part of the text of the institution narrative, I examine the symbolism of bread in the development of the narrative emplotment of Jewish and Christian faith traditions. In particular I consider how bread symbolism has been used to mould a sense of personal and communal identity in terms of a transformational response to remembering past events and anticipating the future.

#### *The Bread We Share*

The Eucharistic Prayer, having acknowledged God’s work of creation and of redemption through Christ’s incarnation, moves on to the institution narrative. This re-tells the story of the Last Supper. The New Testament provides a number of accounts of Jesus giving himself to his disciples through the blessing and sharing of bread and wine at this meal.<sup>1</sup> They tell of Jesus anticipating his death for the sake of others and initiating a new covenant between God and humankind, embodied subsequently in the Church. In response to Jesus’ command, as a memorial of that meal on the night before his death, Christians continue today to share the Eucharist. The institution narrative retells his words and actions, using commonplace commodities to reveal the nature and will of the divine. Jesus took the bread and the cup, gave thanks, broke the bread and gave his disciples the bread to eat and wine to drink, telling them to do this ‘in remembrance of me’ (1 Cor 11:24, 25). In repeating those simple actions, worshippers remember the work of Christ in healing the broken relationship between God and humankind. They unite their worship with the company of heaven and are sent out into the world to fulfil their calling as members of the Body of Christ.

The bread shared at the Eucharist begins as ordinary food, the sort that is an integral part of day-to-day life. Bread, or another form of staple, is put on the table of households of every culture, class, caste and rank, and eaten by people of any status, age or other distinction. In the west at least, it is likely that at some point during the day, people will share bread together – perhaps the family’s breakfast toast, the midday sandwich with work or school colleagues or a bread roll at dinner with friends. It is natural to eat together with others when the opportunity arises, and bread often forms part of that shared meal. So bread in itself can represent table fellowship, that gathering to share a common meal which is an expression of community. The act of sharing food, which can express the communal nature of our everyday life, is a focal event in Christian worship, a fundamental expression of our communal identity and of the community’s relationship with God. In the Christian narrative the shared meal is central to human community and to communion with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:22-24; Mat 26:26-29; Luke 22 17-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25.

The history of the ritual sharing of bread can be traced to the biblical account of the Passover on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which itself holds the memory of the spring festival that marked the season of nature's rebirth. (Epstein 1959:171) Every family in the Israelite community shared a meal in haste and, when the Lord passed over Egypt, they were spared death because they had signalled their identity by smearing animal blood on their doorposts (Ex 12:7). Following their escape, God provided the Israelites with manna to eat daily as they wandered in the desert (Ex 16:13-36). The Passover has been called 'a banquet consecrating the first fruits of the harvest'. (Bouyer 1968:464) It marked a critical moment in the formation of Israel as a people, and their Exodus from Egypt moulded the liberated slaves, through a covenant relationship with God, into a nation. Jews to this day remember these definitive events in the annual Passover festival. Family members share wine and unleavened bread as they recall Yahweh's liberation of the Israelites from bondage. In the Jewish tradition, and in the Christian tradition that sprang from it, the shared meal defines the community's identity. As Rabbi Jonathan Magonet has said, 'Breaking bread together is the most basic and natural part of human community'. (Magonet 2000:105) In the Jewish tradition, all meals (not just those on special occasions) reflect Israelite faith, remembering Yahweh's gifts in creation and in Israel's history. Hence *berakoth*, or table blessings, are prescribed for every meal, and a special blessing is recited by the head of the household or the host at the start of a meal. (Crockett 1989:1)

The importance of food in giving identity to the Jewish community is evidenced by the many consecrating rites that attend eating: saying grace, observing dietary regulations about 'clean' and 'unclean' species, thus imparting a spiritual element to the process of eating. (Epstein 1959/86:161) Jesus' own Jewish community would have been fully aware of the traditional significance of bread and of table fellowship. Preparations for the Passover meal included observances concerning leavened and unleavened bread, and careful preparation of the table. The wine, which was blessed, and each item of food carried symbolic meanings relating to the delivery of Israel from slavery. Indeed, Jesus made use of these connotations on several occasions. In the Gospel of Matthew he teaches his disciples to pray for daily bread (6:11), thus reminding his followers of their reliance on God for nourishment of both body and spirit. All the Gospels give accounts of Jesus feeding great crowds with a few loaves and fish.<sup>2</sup> In John, the crowd, remembering the heavenly manna given to the Israelites, ask him for a sign greater than this (John 6:31). Jesus' response is to declare that he is himself 'the bread of life' (John 6:35) who satisfies the thirst and hunger of all who come to him. The entire discourse is based on the story of the manna given by God to the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex 16). (Lindars 2000:54) The real bread of life is not the perishable manna of the wilderness but Jesus, through whom all who come to him have eternal life.

The theme of Jesus the bread of life continues throughout the fourth Gospel. As with the grain and the bread made from it, a link is made between death and subsequent life. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus compares himself to the wheat seed that must be buried in the soil before it can produce many seeds, (John

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<sup>2</sup> Matt 14:13-21; Matt 15:29-38; Mark 6:30-45; Mark 8:1-9; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13.

12:24) thus underscoring the necessity for his death and its salvific significance.<sup>3</sup> From the planting of seed and the harvesting of the grain to the milling and baking - through a lengthy process of growth, death and transformation - the grain eventually becomes the bread that nourishes life. Jesus, having nearly completed his mortal life and earthly ministry, knows that it is only his death that will bring about redemption for the broken world and new life for all who seek it.

The notion of Jesus, the bread of life, bringing life and nourishment to his disciples continues with the story of the Last Supper. The meal which Jesus and his followers celebrated on the eve of his death was, according to John, not a Passover supper, but a form of *chaburah*, a formal, devotional supper among friends, held on the eve of the Passover feast, and during which each type of food was taken with a blessing. (Dix 1945:50-51)<sup>4</sup> Whether the meal was held on the Passover or on the previous evening, the company would have had in mind the history of the Israelite slaves who, under the leadership of Moses, 'left Egypt in haste' (Deut 16:3). At this meal, however, a central theme is the future reign of God imaged by an eschatological banquet when those who share in salvation sit down to eat and drink in God's presence. (Crockett 1989:5) In anticipation of this feast, Jesus proclaims a new deliverance, not just for the Jewish people but for all humankind. In breaking the bread and distributing the wine he foreshadows the giving of himself for the forgiveness of many.<sup>5</sup> In the synoptic accounts, he announces that he will partake in no more such meals until the Passover finds fulfilment in the coming of the kingdom (Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:16-18).<sup>6</sup> Thus Jesus transforms the traditional Passover feast to provide the model for the shared meal that would give identity to the Early Church. Indeed, according to William Crockett, any table meal with Jesus was a 'visible sign of the dawning of the future reign of God'. (Crockett 1989:6) It anticipated a new relationship with God and with one's neighbour, signalling the fellowship of the future kingdom.

The common meal became for the first followers the visible proclamation of the Gospel and call to discipleship to all who participated in it. By the middle of the second century, most Christian communities participated in a commemorative meal as a symbolic sharing of bread and wine. Actions of blessing and sharing

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<sup>3</sup> R Alan Culpepper comments that the parable of the grain of wheat 'may well be an authentic parable that is not contained in the Synoptic Gospels', although there are echoes on loving life and losing life in Mark 8:35, Matt 10:39, 16:25 and Luke 9:24. (Culpepper 1998:194)

<sup>4</sup> Bouyer explores in some detail the arguments for and against the Last Supper falling on the day of the Passover. (Bouyer 1968:97-99) He concludes that 'whether the Supper was this special meal or another, there is no doubt that Jesus did not connect the Eucharistic institution of the new covenant to any of the details that are proper to the Passover meal alone'. (1968:99)

<sup>5</sup> Bouyer lists the traditional formulae that Jesus probably used to bless the bread and wine. (Bouyer 1968:102)

<sup>6</sup> Bouyer sees Jesus' words about drinking wine again only in the Kingdom as a direct allusion to the Jewish ritual blessing (*berakah*) said with the first cup of wine. (Bouyer 1968:79)

were combined with prayers, scripture readings and a homily by the bishop or presbyter.<sup>7</sup> The Eucharist has continued to be celebrated throughout the history of Christianity in response to Jesus' command to 'do this in memory of me' (Luke 22:19). Over the centuries, various liturgical forms and doctrinal developments have influenced theological interpretations of the significance of the bread broken and shared, but fundamental factors – the link with the Last Supper, Christ's death and resurrection, incarnation and redemption and the response of the Christian community – have remained constant. Since the earliest days the bread of communion has represented the unity of the catholic Church and the call to a transformative response. The fraction, the breaking of the bread, shows the unity in diversity that is the nature of the universal Church. As the bread is broken the community declares its unity as one body, gathered together as scattered grains of wheat form a single loaf. (Didache 1X, in White 1992:182)<sup>8</sup>

The bread of the Eucharist signifies not a single people with a particular culture, but a worldwide body of people of very disparate cultures who share a common faith in Christ. The bread of table fellowship is the signal of membership of the Church not through birth and culture but through faith and baptism. It signifies, according to Bouyer, 'the offering of the whole of human life and of the entire world with it to the acknowledged will of God.' (Bouyer 1968:464)<sup>9</sup> Unity and recognition of a new relationship with God are brought to visible expression as worshippers break and share food to bring forth life. Food stands in this context for both sacrifice and for service. Caroline Walker Bynum puts it thus: 'Macerated by teeth before it can be assimilated to sustain life, food mirrors and recapitulates both suffering and fertility'. (Bynum 1987:30) Jesus Christ, who was broken on the cross, nourishes the community of believers as they eat the bread and enables them to live a new life in the spirit.

### ***Eucharistic Significance: Past, Future And Present***

The bread affirms membership of the community of the Body of Christ. Because it is shared it signifies also a commitment to be part of that fellowship as it is lived out in the one universal Church. The priest declares:

We break this bread to share in the Body of Christ

The congregation responds:

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<sup>7</sup> See Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, quoted in White 1992:184-185.

<sup>8</sup> The Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, was written between 65 and 80AD. The second of three parts includes teaching on the Eucharist. It gives instruction for giving thanks, including the following words: 'As this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever.' (White 1992:182)

<sup>9</sup> In practice, Eucharistic communion between different denominations is a sensitive and complex issue. Anglican and Free Churches usually offer Eucharistic hospitality, whereby communicant members in good standing from another denomination can receive communion. This is not normal practice in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. See Churches Together In England (1996) *Called To Be One*, Appendix C.

Though we are many, we are one body  
because we all share in the one bread

Christians give thanks communally for what Christ has done for them; in his saving action they find redemption. Jesus' giving of himself takes humankind from death to life, from bondage to liberation. Jesus is the new manna, the bread that sustains believers as they feed on him throughout their life journey. The Eucharist shares with the Passover a memorial function: both rites mark crucial points in the narrative of the Jewish and Christian faiths. As the Israelites fed on manna during the Exodus, so the Christian community, journeying on the exodus towards the kingdom of Christ, now feeds on the bread of the Eucharist. The bread, then, not only takes Christians back through the tradition and history of their faith community. It also signifies the salvation that they believe has been brought about once for all by Christ's incarnation and now continues through grace in their daily lives. It assures them, as they make that journey towards the kingdom, of God's provision for them, supplying their day-to-day bodily and spiritual needs. The bread of the Eucharist points towards the future, for as worshippers eat and drink they 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). At the Eucharist, they affirm their dying to their previous life and their commitment to a new life as members of Christ's Body, the Church, living in the power of his resurrection. So what is celebrated is not only a memorial feast but also a proclamation of what is to come. Besides remembrance of Jesus' death there is also anticipation of his parousia and of the Church uniting with him in the heavenly kingdom that he has inaugurated. That is the promise which is celebrated at the Eucharist, where, as Henri Nouwen has written, 'we are waiting for the Lord, who has already come'. (Nouwen 2000:135)

The anticipated heavenly bond between God and the Church, foreshadowed in the Eucharist, is often depicted in scripture as the wedding banquet. On several occasions the Gospels record Jesus adopting wedding imagery to depict the coming of the kingdom. To his hearers, such imagery would have been familiar from the prophetic writings. In Isaiah 62 and Hosea 2, Israel's restored relationship with the Lord is depicted in terms of a wedding or betrothal. Psalm 45, a royal marriage ode, praises the king on his marriage to a princess. The imagery was applied after the exile to the promised Messiah (the Church later also understood it as a prophecy of the Messiah and so it is appropriately recited on Christmas Eve). In a similar vein, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a king preparing a wedding banquet for his son (Mat 22: 1-14). The invitation to attend is thrown open to all, but those who accept have the responsibility of preparing themselves. In the Lucan parallel (14:15-24) emphasis is placed on the inclusive nature of the kingdom. Those who might be expected to attend decline the invitation, and their places are taken by the outcasts and the rejected.

The usual interpretation of these parables is that all are invited without exception to the feast, and each must take responsibility for obeying the call, whatever the individual circumstances. That onus to prepare adequately for the coming kingdom is clear in Jesus' parable of the ten virgins awaiting the bridegroom, for five of them have insufficient oil for their lamps and so cannot accompany him to the banquet (Mat 25:1-13). In Revelation we also see the coming kingdom vividly portrayed in terms of a wedding banquet. Preparations are made for the guests at the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). The bride, the new

Jerusalem, shines like a precious jewel with the glory of God (Rev 21:11). She wears fine linen, representing the 'righteous deeds of the saints' (Rev 19:8).

The feast of the Eucharist is freighted with symbolism of the heavenly banquet that marks the ultimate union of Christ and his Church, depicted in scripture as the bride who appears in the full glory of her wedding raiment to give herself to her Lord. The manna of the Old Testament signifies the bond between Yahweh and the chosen nation, an image closely linked with the feminine/female, with the land and with a particular national and geographical identity. The bread of the Eucharist, however, symbolises the bond between Christ and the global body of believers, vastly diverse yet held together by membership of the universal Church. So everyone who accepts the Gospel invitation has the promise and hope of maturing to full personhood in union with Christ. Anticipating that heavenly union, worshippers taste the 'goodness of the Word of God and powers of the age to come' (Heb 6:5) in the bread of life and the cup of blessing.

This eschatological dimension of the bread and the cup has been subject to a range of interpretations. The idea of the kingdom of God is a recurring theme in the Gospels, suggesting that God's rule will be fully manifested at the end of time.<sup>10</sup> The 'now/not yet' tension has been treated in a variety of ways through church history. The earliest Christians expected an immanent *parousia*, at the same time recognising that the reign of God was already manifesting itself. Belief in the immanent appearance of the kingdom on earth largely waned but the eschatological vision remained for Christians to transform the world according to the ministry and teaching of Christ. Hence evangelicals saw missionary activity as an important step in bringing in the kingdom of God. The kingdom was the chief focus of proponents of the Protestant Social Gospel, seeking to raise ethical standards in the community at large.

With the rise of liberation theology in the twentieth century, interest in equality, justice and truth in relation to the kingdom was revived. Interpretations of the kingdom vary along a continuum between individual and future aspects (conservative) and communal and present aspects (liberal). In either case, although the emphasis between the individual and the corporate may vary, anticipation of that which is to come is accompanied, in the bread of the Eucharist, with the calling to imitate Christ in the offering of one's life in the service of others as part of that journey towards the kingdom. So the bread that is shared, in marking the identity of each worshipper as part of the Body of Christ, signifies not only the long heritage of faith but also the imperative of living the new life in Christ in anticipation of the coming kingdom. The bread broken and shared, then, is understood as a reminder of the imperative to make ready now for that final consummation between the divine and humankind, between Christ the bridegroom and the Church, his heavenly bride. For a Christian, part of the transformational act of partaking in the Eucharist is realising the need not to be found lacking, as were the foolish virgins, in preparing now to usher in the kingdom of God.

The Church, as the bride preparing for the wedding banquet, anticipates that perfect and harmonious union with the divine made possible through Christ's

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20, 17:21, 21:31.

redeeming action. The priest, in representing the Church, testifies to the meaning and purpose of redemption. At the Eucharist, giving thanks and breaking the bread on behalf of the universal Church, the priest recalls the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and represents all those who accept the promise of that redemption. The priest also witnesses to the call to all redeemed people to work towards the vision of the kingdom that will be fulfilled in the age to come. Hence the sacrament of the Eucharist takes the most ordinary and everyday elements of life to reveal and express the great themes of the narrative of faith whilst, at the same time, bearing an ethical imperative of individual and communal transformation in response to continuing divine revelation.



## CHAPTER 7

### BROKEN BODY, BROKEN WORLD – SOME FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

#### Mention Roberta Guatemala somewhere

*'Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you'*

I have proposed that hitherto ignored or undervalued dimensions of nature and the body can be reclaimed through the symbolic significance of the woman priest. Such a proposal hangs on the longstanding cultural tendency to associate nature and the body with the feminine/female. Women's perceived closer relationship with nature has been attributed to their more relational psychology, to the historically more 'rooted' work they have carried out, and to their physiology. (Deane-Drummond 2002:190). The assumed connection between women and the earth has been called into question by some feminists. Celia Deane-Drummond argues that 'the very attempt to seek out the link between nature and women smacks of essentialism.' (2002:191). For Deane-Drummond, this leaves unanswered the questions of how men might enter the dialogue, and of how structures of oppression might be addressed. (2002:191) On this problematic question of women's relationship with nature it may be more productive to think in terms of Irigaray's notion of sexual difference rather than of essentialism. Irigaray argued that the language of women is different from that of men. (2004:151) This reveals the need, not to confine women in an essentialist paradigm, but to acknowledge difference, whether of gender, race or class. Men and women are two different subjects: they are culturally different. (1993c:26) It is the difference that is universal; and it may be that, however diverse feminine subjectivity and spirituality, their symbolic expression will tend to be enunciated in relation to nature, to the corporeal, to the material.

Grey remarks on the extraordinary paradox that woman's identification with nature has denigrated her sexuality, and yet through it women have discovered 'a healing strength and wholeness...which offer an alternative to the body/spirit dualism characteristic of western philosophy since Descartes'. (Grey 1989:43) The feminine/female relationship with nature is evidently one that is freighted with issues of essentialism and with both positive and negative connotations for women. What is clear is that such a connection has been assumed throughout recorded history, and is still evident today in the Church, notably by the fact that women are, or have been until very recently, barred from holy spaces, objects and rituals.

Here, in developing the theme of an eschatological vision symbolised in the bread of the Eucharist, I explore some feminist responses to the notion of redemption in terms of the human relationship with the divine, with one another and with the created world. I show that feminist theologies, earthed as they are in the concrete, broken world, make a major contribution to the way that Christians understand these relationships.

#### ***Aspects Of A Feminist Eschatology***

I have argued that the bread of the Eucharist, like the Gospel narratives from which the eucharistic liturgy has developed, carries with it an eschatological

vision which has received a range of interpretations through Christian history. The tension between anticipation of a future beyond time and the reality of the broken world today is a recurring theme in feminist theology. As I have shown, where gender categories have tended to be fixed, the feminine/female has traditionally been associated with the corporeal, with nature and emotion, areas which have been seen as less godlike than those associated with the masculine/male. Feminist analyses, whilst rejecting any form of dualism, characteristically tends to operate within this more 'down-to-earth' arena - that is, in terms not of some other utopian realm at the end of time, but of transformation of the concrete world here and now. Hence feminist interest focuses on restoring the harmonious relationship between humankind and the divine to which the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve bear witness. From this point of view, the ethical imperative facing worshippers at the Eucharist relates not solely to some future age and circumstance but to the daily needs of the present broken world.

Another focus for feminist analysis, again characteristically attributed to the feminine/female and its association with embodiment, is interpersonal relationality. The eschatological vision includes a return to those harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships, for instance between women and men, and between other groups, for which humankind was originally created. Moreover, since embodied lives cannot be divorced from their sustaining environment, this vision of redemption must include the coming of a harmonious and caring relationship between people and the created world. In a nutshell, such a vision demands that we are to 'do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God' (Mic. 6:8). Harmony and justice are key concepts in a feminist eschatology. Redemption is not only or even primarily about a hoped-for heavenly existence after death. Rather, as Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it, it is:

about reclaiming an original goodness that is still available as our true selves, although obscured by false ideologies and social structures that have justified domination of some and subordination of others. (Ruether 1998b:8)

Those who accept Ruether's definition will necessarily critique and challenge any current ideologies and social structures that militate against an eschatological hope and vision for a coming kingdom conformed to the prophetic vision of Micah.<sup>1</sup> Hence a major concern of feminist theology is to address the systematic injustices that pervade society and from which all people need to be redeemed. For Ruether, Jesus is the 'representative of humanity and the liberating Word of God', and those who respond to his call represent 'the overthrow of the present world system and the sign of a dawning new age in

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'kingdom' is itself problematic for many feminists due to historical connotations of patriarchal power, violence and domination. I retain it here because it is a 'root' metaphor, a powerful and multivalent symbol capable of a range of interpretation, including a subversive one prophesied by Mary in the Magnificat and evident through the ministry and teaching of Jesus. See Dines, Jenny, (1996) 'Kingdom' in Isherwood, Lisa & Dorothea McEwan, eds. *An A To Z Of Feminist Theology*, pp.116-117.

which God's will is done on earth.' (Ruether 1983:137-8) Redemption calls for a vision of justice, mercy and humility before God that moves humankind closer to the kingdom of Christ that believers are called to anticipate.

### ***Humankind And The Divine: The Natal***

A feminist theology concerned with the process of redemption in the here and now is sensitive to insights which other theologies, because of their androcentric worldview, have overlooked. Western philosophy and religion have thus been criticised by feminist thinkers for their masculinist bias which undervalues the importance of gender and embodiment and tends to put the abstract and spiritual in opposition to the concrete and corporeal. With women now celebrating the Eucharist, the question arises as to how their presence might change entrenched symbolic associations between humankind and the divine. Recognition of sexual difference assumes diversity in the religious imaginary, in human experience and so in symbolic expression of faith. Susan Ross, in an essay on sacramental theology, argues that women's experiences of the link between the physical and spiritual, between body and soul is a significant resource for expressing belief in the 'mystery and presence of God-for-us in the Incarnation'. (Ross 1993:197)

Yet, for many people, both women and men, the idea of female embodiment as a locus for encountering the divine is fraught with ambiguity. This may be especially the case where women are excluded from ordination. Ross (a Roman Catholic) notes that the celebration of the Eucharist can be 'a source of pain and anger as much as a source of grace and unity', and adds: 'That the sacrament of unity is a symbol of sexual inequality causes many to question its centrality to their own spiritual lives'. (Ross 1993:204) Ross urges that sacramental theology, with its interest in symbol, metaphor and ritual, be attentive to gender as a hitherto unacknowledged dimension in symbolic expression. (1993:206)

In my earlier exploration of the meaning of *imago Dei* I noted the reciprocal relationship between an understanding of selfhood and a concept of the divine. Irigaray has demonstrated that selfhood, whether in relation to oneself or even when used as an analogue for God, has largely been explored without proper regard to sexual difference, gender or embodiment, but has taken for granted a masculine selfhood. Feminist thinkers, in critiquing this historic tendency to ignore sexual difference, have drawn on elements traditionally associated with the feminine/female in order to counterbalance or destabilise traditionally, masculinist symbols and interpretations that have dominated Christian religion and culture. Both Mary Grey and Grace Jantzen, for instance, make a connection between male-dominated cultures and a preponderance of death symbolism. Grey, in using a creation-based, non-dualistic spirituality to recover a sense of wholeness for women, maintains that the history of Christianity, littered with symbols of death, blood-guilt and sacrifice, is linked to a commensurate history of slaughter and other violence. (Grey 1989:139)

I have noted what Jantzen believes to be a male preoccupation with death 'from late antiquity through to modernity'. (Jantzen 1998a:3) Her attempt to initiate a reversal of the tendency towards necrophilia encompasses, as I have shown, the notion of the individual as a natal 'within the prism constructed by the

triangulation of religion, culture and gender'. (1998c:3) The wholeness to which we aspire – the divine horizon - is related to our gendered, embodied subjectivities; and this is an area, according to Jantzen, that has been largely ignored in Anglo-American philosophy. The western, masculinist concept of selfhood, preoccupied with death, lacks focus on the needs of the embodied, material world of the here and now. Jantzen cites evidence from Freud and from the development of psychoanalysis to show the conceptual connection between women and death, stemming from a young child's experience of separation from the mother and their entry into a phallogocentric society. Death thus becomes associated with women's bodies, whilst denial of death and efforts to master it lead to widespread misogyny. (1998c:132) Efforts to escape death and the constraints of the body, according to Jantzen, reveal blatant gender and class bias: 'it looks suspiciously as though a good preparation for finding heaven comfortable would be membership of an Oxford senior common room'. (1998b:108) As I have already discussed, Jantzen suggests the possibility of destabilizing the imaginary of death in order to open up new possibilities for a transformation not dominated by the masculine/male. The challenge here is to imagine the body outside the traditional binary oppositions such as mind/body and sacred/profane, a task acknowledged as exploring new spheres of thought. (Carrette and King 1998:125)

Jantzen's proposal for a concept of natality, through which women would find a voice, is meant not just as a physical or psychological characteristic, but as 'a philosophical/symbolic category operating as a contrast to mortality.' (Jantzen 1998c:131n) The symbolic of natality, and a religion offering an horizon of wholeness to which to aspire, takes birth as a foundational feminine symbolic open to all people since all are natals. Birth is, after all, the basis for everyone's existence; it is always materially embodied, gendered, and connected with others and with history. It is always rooted in the material and relational (one cannot be born alone). There can be no disembodied natality; so the imaginary of natality must always be rooted in the physical and material. (1998c:145) The imaginary of natality is necessarily grounded in the concrete.

Jantzen's criticism of western traditional philosophy of religion and her development of the notion of natality have been called into question. Pamela Anderson, in correspondence with Jantzen, claims that Jantzen's rejection of belief as a western, male construction is sweeping and results in the 'very oppositional thinking which [she seeks] to dissolve as characteristic of the masculinist obsession with aggression, violence and death.' (Anderson 2000:112) Moreover, might not a projection of a female version of the imaginary in women becoming divine replace masculinist thought with 'a new hegemony of the female imaginary'? (2000:115) My own intention in drawing on Jantzen's notion of natality is not to valorise a female imaginary over a masculine one. It is, however, to demonstrate the potential of the female imaginary in the context of human aspiration towards the divine; and to argue that the woman priest in her corporeality concretises aspects of the symbolism of the maternal divine and our response to the divine which have hitherto been repressed or ignored.

Anderson asks: 'For whom is natality a therapeutic model?' (2000:116) She cautions that it may be an incomplete or insufficient therapy, bearing in mind the negative associations of suffering and potential death always linked with birth: 'It is wrong and exclusive to devalue mortality as the symbolic of masculinist

necrophilia.’ (2000:116) Indeed, as I have already made clear, the notion of birth is intimately linked not only with new life and creativity but also with suffering, loss and possible death. My own reading of Jantzen does not find her devaluing mortality: she herself attests that ‘it is not part of a feminist agenda to deny death...[or] the importance or depth of philosophical and religious reflections of mortality’. (2000:141) Jantzen does not promote natality as ‘a futile denial of death’ or as an ‘exaltation of maternity’. (Jantzen 1998a:3) She does, however, call for a double reading that recognises natality as ‘the unacknowledged and untheorised other of death’ which destabilises the necrophilic imaginary. (Anderson 2000:141)<sup>2</sup> The notion of natality can help towards the endorsement of a vision of the kingdom that encompasses a restoration of the divine/human relationship through the recognition of sexual difference. The redemptive process must be approached not only in terms of escape from death and aspiration towards other worlds but also in the context of the embodied nature and material conditions of human lives and experience. The ethical responsiveness required by a symbolic of natality and its recognition of the needs of the material, here-and-now world would, Jantzen asserts, ‘disrupt the patriarchal symbolic order and open the way for constructive relationships, including gender-relationships’. (2000:151)

### ***One To Another: Community And Redemption***

I have considered so far the relationship between humankind and the divine in the process of redemption. I now address the relationship between one and another, both as individuals and as communities. In his essay ‘The Image Of God And The Epic Of Man’, Paul Ricoeur comments that ‘Man is not wholly individuated, but is both individual and collective’. (Ricoeur 1965:113) Ricoeur develops his theme in terms of relationships experienced on ‘an interpersonal place and within the setting of economic, political and cultural institutions and organisations’. (1965:114)

Christianity is essentially a religion of community, and redemption is concerned not solely with the individual and with personal immortality, but with groups, with relationships between people, and with hope for all in life here and now. It is not only a matter of private morality, but of a right relationship with and a responsibility for the well-being of others. Redemption through Christ requires the commitment to helping others (whether individuals or large organisations) in the direction of redemption. If worshippers have confidence in the power of the eucharistic rite to bring about transformation, to demand a response of action and commitment, then this applies not just to individuals but also to the local and global community. The response to God’s active presence, manifested in the Eucharist, is to live and act in witness to the healing, restorative redemption that Christ has already achieved. Through him the hope of just living is restored so that the opportunity arises to live in right relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation. Worshippers, through symbol, narrative and ritual, are

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<sup>2</sup> Carrette and King note that images of natality are found in other religious traditions besides Christianity, including Buddhism. Engaging with such images, they contend, will help towards a reconfiguration of the religious symbolic in the postmodern era, which requires ‘moving beyond the tropes and images of western Christianity’. (Carrette & King 1998:142)

affirmed in the Eucharist as creatures in the image of God. Since that affirmation carries the notion of equality before God, then it must endorse an ethical imperative to oppose any beliefs or actions that fall short of the doctrine of *imago Dei* by perpetuating injustices that deny human equality and diversity, for instance through domination and oppression of one group by another.

Irigaray comments that: 'Social justice, and especially sexual justice, cannot be achieved without changing the laws of language and the conceptions of truths and values structuring the social order.' (Irigaray 1993b:22) A feminist interpretation of redemption focuses on this-worldly hope, including a movement away from injustice, rather than otherworldly eschatology. A community of redemption must be one where the full humanity of all people is upheld and respected. Working towards such a redemptive community involves eradicating the roots of oppression, often explained away as God's will rather than as the symptom of corrupt social systems or ideologies. Mary Daly argues that, as marginal beings searching for subjectivity, women are well-placed to see the delusion of this 'God-of-the-gaps' who is often 'a front for men's plans and a cover for inadequacy, ignorance and evil'. (Daly 2003:43) Such false idols, she claims, obstruct the 'becoming of the image of God', the implications of which cannot be worked through under patriarchal conditions. (Daly 2003:42)<sup>3</sup>

Other than their correlation with patriarchal societies, social and sexual injustices have historically shown little bias in terms of the religious character of the culture in which they occur. They are found in a broad range of religions from Christianity to atheism. However, where such injustices occur, it is often women who are left disadvantaged in terms of status, employment, property, access to health care and education and so on. The world-renowned economist Amartya Sen has shown, for instance, that the ratio of women to men in China and in some other parts of Asia is well below that of Europe, Japan and North America, indicating women's lack of access to medical care, food and social services. The figures also reflect the practice in some regions of female infanticide.<sup>4</sup>

Erlinda Senturias, formerly in charge of the AIDS programme of the Christian Medical Commission for the World Council Of Churches, reports that in the Philippines, women are often uneducated about AIDS and lack power in relationships with male partners, so that they are less able to protect themselves against infection. (Senturias 2001:14) Xinran's book *The Good Women Of China* offers a penetrating insight into the lives of Chinese women before, during and following the cultural revolution. Through interviews with women who have never before told their own stories, she chronicles a society in which men's physical abuse of wives and children is widely tolerated; (Xinran 2003:201) where many poor women lack even the basic diet eaten by men; (2003:219) and

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<sup>3</sup> The excerpt quoted here is taken from *Beyond God The Father*, originally published in 1986. Editor Janet Soskice observes that Daly's proposition that women must name God (correctly) so that they can name themselves anticipates the work of Irigaray. (2003:41)

<sup>4</sup> See Sen's article, 'More Than One Hundred Million Women Are Missing'; also Soskice 1996:23. Sen notes sources showing a considerable rise in female infant mortality in China following compulsory measures introduced in 1979 to limit family size. <http://ucatlas.ucsc.edu.gender/Sen100M.html> p.7 (accessed 24.04.06).

where girls in poor communities have to share clothes, since boys are given priority over any garments available. (2003:222). Xinran provides an illuminating example of how institutions in a patriarchal society, by denying women full access to the prevailing culture, have encouraged women to believe themselves of little importance, emotionally weak and intellectually inferior.

Nations in the first-world, Christian west are hardly in a position of superiority with regard to a history of asymmetric gender relations. The pioneering examples of nineteenth-century English women such as Emily Davies, instrumental in the opening in 1837 of Girton, the first female university college, throw into relief the very lack of access to public culture prevailing for women in the west until relatively recently. Another ground-breaking figure is a woman who attended the institution founded by Davies. Irene Manton became the first female professor and first female head of department at Leeds University, and first (and only) female president of the Linnean Society of London. Biographer Barry Leadbetter notes that she attended Girton College at a time (the 1920s) when 'Cambridge University was the last bastion of male chauvinism', refusing women entry to graduation ceremonies and barring full access to libraries. (Leadbetter 2004:17) Yet Manton persevered to become a world-renowned botanist with a commitment to women's emancipation. (2004:3)

A further example, this time in the field of sexual morality, is Josephine Butler, who fought against the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s and fought against child prostitution, campaigning to get the age of consent raised from thirteen to sixteen years. Margaret Forster argues that she 'made everybody examine the existing moral basis to society' - including sex legislation that regarded the female sex as a commodity for men's use - and encouraged its reform. (Forster 2004:201-2).<sup>5</sup> In such circumstances it takes a lot of courage, determination and perhaps a certain critical mass of far-sighted people for women as a whole in a particular society to believe themselves capable of flourishing in areas previously denied to them, for instance by voting, by entering university or parliament, by becoming a professor or a priest.

### ***One To Another: Healing Human Relationships***

The examples I have given above illustrative the wider struggle of women everywhere to find a voice and an identity, and of all marginalised and oppressed people to be liberated from social injustices. From a feminist viewpoint, the broken human relationships illustrative of such injustices can be redeemed only through dismantling justifications of patriarchy in favour of alternative views that recognise sexual difference, often with a focus on relationality with the body and with other humans. An understanding of redemption within such a feminist discourse focuses on the imperative to tackle here and now the problems of a broken world. Jantzen's concept of natality, for instance, presupposes that the aspiration to become divine is not about preparation for life after death but for life *before* death, 'where the possibilities of

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Forster, in her book *Significant Sisters: The Grassroots Of Active Feminism*, provides examples of British and American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (including Emily Davies and Josephine Butler) who pioneered women's engagement in education, ethics, politics, law and medicine. (Forster 2004)

nativity are opened out'. (2000:141) Characteristically of feminist concern with actual, narratable individual lives, she argues that the notion of nativity indicates that 'each life is special,' (1998b:113) and that it induces a real concern for people's lives. (1998:146)

For Jantzen, a symbolic centred on birth and focused on embodiment goes 'a long way toward shifting the agenda away from intellectual justification and toward material justice'. (1998b:111) Where nativity is celebrated, systems such as totalitarianism that deny individual human value would become impossible. (1998c:147) Where the concern is for birth and for life, the dignity of each person is paramount, and the voices of all, including those as yet without a voice, will be heard. The imaginary of nativity, unlike that of misogyny, connects one to another in the web of life: 'Becoming divine is not a matter of escape from the world but of finding it our home'. (1998c:152) So, following Jantzen's argument, the process of redemption – of becoming divine - must involve being concerned with righting broken relationships in the here and now.

To this end, Jantzen develops Irigaray's notion of searching for a way of flourishing in pursuit of human becoming. (Irigaray 2003:1) Within the parameters of Christian tradition, Jantzen argues that a symbolic of flourishing would open a space for women subjects, since it 'denotes abundance, overflowing with vigour and energy and productiveness, prosperity, success and good health'. (1996:70) The concept of flourishing assumes a natural human goodness. It is self-evidently closely associated with the goodness of nature, based as it is on the idea of rootedness, growth and blossoming. Jantzen cites a broad biblical base for the concept of flourishing in the Hebrew scriptures, and notes that parallel concepts are found in the New Testament in terms of fullness and abundance. The psalmist predicts that the righteous will flourish like palm trees (92:12). Israel is the unproductive vineyard that yields only bad fruit (Isa. 5:17). A passage from Hosea illustrates the notion as flowing from a restored relationship with God:

I will be like the dew to Israel;  
he shall blossom like the lily,  
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.  
His shoots shall spread out;  
his beauty shall be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of  
Lebanon.  
They shall again live beneath my shadow,  
they shall flourish as a garden;  
they shall blossom like the vine,  
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon. (Hosea 14:5-6)

Jesus tells the parable of the seed that flourishes when it falls on fertile ground (Matt 13). He speaks of himself as the true vine, and his followers as its branches (John 15:1-8).<sup>6</sup> Human flourishing, ultimately manifested in Jesus Christ, is rather like the vine and its many branches, in that it requires interconnectedness with other people; it cannot be achieved in isolation. Since the concept of flourishing includes the idea of growth and well-being, it is concerned with bodiliness, with community and with justice for all people,

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<sup>6</sup> Jantzen also mentions Eph 3.19-20, 2 Cor 9:8, John 10:10.



whether on a local or a global scale. Compassion and nurturing love, essential to flourishing, are qualities of God's redemptive nature that are seen time and again in scripture to be associated with the feminine and in feminine language. For instance, John Sawyer addresses the Hebraic terms 'love, warmth, compassion', which, as mentioned in chapter 1, are etymologically linked to the term 'womb'. (Sawyer 1989:90) Sawyer finds that the closing passages of Isaiah are particularly rich in '...positive images of maternal warmth, contentment and fecundity'. (1989:106) There is the image of God forming a human being in the womb (Isa. 49:5) and showing compassionate care as does a mother for a child at her breast (Isa. 49:15). God is depicted also as a mother comforting her child (Isa. 66:13); and as the midwife when Zion is in labour (Isa.66:7-9). Elsewhere, the psalmist pictures Yahweh full of compassion (Ps. 116:5) and motherly care (Ps. 131). In the New Testament, also, the divine compassion in Christ longs to gather the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing (Luke 13:34). Jesus' lament here reveals the compassionate God who yearns not so much to judge the unrighteous as to nurture all people to full humanity under God's all-embracing care.

A theology of flourishing stands in contrast to a traditional patriarchal concept of salvation which sees humanity as corrupt and sinful, and to an individualistic understanding of salvation which can tend to become inward-looking and supportive of the *status quo*. (Watson 2003:89) In salvation God intervenes from outside to save humans from calamity, whereas flourishing conceptualises the divine source and ground, the imminent divine within people, a premise of creativity rather than faulty nature. In this model, Jesus Christ the redeemer is envisaged not as the heroic saviour but as life lived within the creative justice of God. (Jantzen 1998:162) The concept of flourishing requires a radical shift in assumptions about gender, since women are traditionally linked with nature and yet, contrary to tradition, the female must now be linked with goodness and a natural ability to flourish. Similarly, the masculine/male, linked traditionally with goodness, must now also be linked with nature, since it is from nature that flourishing arises. Thus Jantzen calls into questions the age-old dualistic association of the masculine with spirit and goodness and the feminine with nature and sinfulness.<sup>7</sup>

Jantzen argues that a nondualistic theology of flourishing would prompt 'a whole new theology of gender relations'. (Jantzen 1996a:71) Within such a refigured theology, the theme of community, an essential backdrop to much Christian feminist thought, would surely be prominent. For many women, the sense of inclusive, liberating community necessary for flourishing has been lacking in the traditional church establishment. Concerned to find or to make a model of community closer to their ideals of equality, mutuality and freedom, some have left the traditional church to form new Christian communities or have left Christianity altogether. The Church has traditionally upheld and celebrated a notion of community that has actually not been truly communal for all persons. The authors of 'Faith In The City', for example, argue that the Church has failed to offer the world a praxis of community 'at least as often as it has succeeded'. However:

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<sup>7</sup> I examine in more detail the association of the feminine/female with sinfulness in chapters 9 and 10.

It is only when the Church itself is sensed to be a community in which all alienation caused by age, gender, race and class is decisively overcome that its mission can begin to be authentic among the millions who feel themselves alienated not only from the Church, but also from society as a whole. (Archbishop's Commission On Urban Priority Areas 1985:58)

A feminist vision of community is summed up by Dorothea McEwan as involving a transformation from the pursuit of narrow personal piety alone to the pursuit of and engagement in societal concerns, to being in communion with the community, offering fellowship and partnership, equality and wholeness to fragmented, segmented societies. (McEwan 1991:252)

In such a vision, all members necessarily relate one to another as equal, free partners without subjugation or domination. Since sexuate difference is fundamental to the human condition, then the principle of equality and freedom applies in any group to the issue of gender. The human way of being, of experiencing the world and of interacting with others is closely associated with gendered being, so wherever a group of people seek to collaborate, the gender mix will have a bearing on the dynamics of the group.

Recent research in the field of psychology has produced findings that are relevant to sexuate difference and its association with relationality. Until recently, studies in the social sciences have tended to be carried out largely by men on male subjects, with men's experience used as a benchmark for both men and women. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1986:7) However, research by Carol Gilligan on women subjects confirmed sexuate difference in the experience of women when she traced the development of morality. Whereas previous (male-based) research focused on notions of law, principle and fairness, Gilligan uncovered a morality, primarily among women, organised around notions of responsibility and care:

The psychology of women that has consistently been described as distinctive in its greater orientation toward relationships and interdependence implies a more contextual mode of judgement and a different moral understanding to that of men. Given the differences in women's conceptions of self and morality, women bring to the life cycle a different point of view and order human experience in terms of different priorities. (Gilligan 1982:22)

There is difference, Gilligan concludes, in the way women and men structure relationship, how they understand achievement and affiliation, and how they assess the consequence of choice. Sexuate differences tend to centre around experiences of attachment and separation. Identity for women is largely defined through relationships of intimacy and care. The focus of women's moral concern is an ethic of responsibility, 'anchoring the self in a world of relationships and giving rise to activities of care'. (1982:132) In terms of social maturity, men see danger more often in 'close personal affiliation than in achievement and construe danger to arise from intimacy'. Women, however, see danger in 'impersonal achievement situations and construe danger to result from competitive success.' (1982:42) This is a difference so profound that psychologists have found it hard to discern or decipher since this shift in the imagery of relationship produces a problem for interpretation that has hitherto

been in the male domain. Gilligan suggests that rather than the hierarchy of male imagery, women's imagery is better expressed as a web, a non-hierarchical vision of human connection which 'changes an order of inequality into a structure of interconnection'. (1982:62)

Gilligan's findings have since been confirmed by other research. Sheila Durkin Dierks, who interviewed members of Women's eucharist groups which she had initiated, found that the growing body of data on women's maturation processes shows that interconnection rather than total autonomy is basic to feminine maturity. (Dierks 1997:137) Women continually value and practise relationship in a way that men do not. For the masculinised world, which privileges autonomy above relationality, maturity is correlated with individualism, and 'has a hard time seeing interconnection and responsibility as maturation also'. (1997:137)

The scientific findings of Gilligan and Dierks are borne out in the observations of many writers who note the differences between the way women and men interrelate. For example, Myra Blyth, Director for Relations in the World Council Of Churches, writes of watching survivors of Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua. The men, she found, displayed anger, hopelessness and bitterness about what they had lost. They were outraged at the injustice, and inclined towards either violence or to walking away. The women, on the whole, showed resilience; they set to work 'picking up the pieces of their lives and directing their attention to helping the children and the neighbourhood survive. Walking away is a luxury women cannot afford'. (Blyth 2001:156) Blyth notes similar situations in Yugoslavia, where women were able to create communities and help them survive: 'They somehow recognised and tapped into those qualities that hold people together.' (2001:156)

Kathy Galloway, a minister in the Church Of Scotland, recalls working with two groups of people, one all-male and the other all-female. She found the modes of working together quite different. The men's working mode was 'critical, dialectical and at times fairly confrontational ...intellectually rigorous...sharp, challenging and demanding'. (Galloway 1995:15) She found the 'high adrenalin factor' initially attractive, but soon began to feel increasingly bruised, since she was finding herself 'operating in ways I did not like about myself'. (1995:16) One group member commented to her: 'We men are so bad at taking care of each other'. (1995:16) Galloway found the women's group, by contrast, open, vulnerable, ready to share struggles, failures and worries. She noticed their sense of mutual interdependence and need for support, as well as an air of insecurity and a lack of belief among group members, all competent people, in their own abilities and strengths.

This echoes the earlier work of Anne Wilson Schaef, whose analysis of psycho-sexual gender differences included the finding that women have but a fragile trust in their own perceptions, and are fearful of 'being labelled sick, bad, crazy or stupid'. (Schaef 1992:74) Schaef argues that this lack of trust is a matter of inculturation, and that women 'rarely have the opportunity to explore [their perceptions] without being criticised or dismissed'. (1992:96) She notes ways in which women's characteristic ways of working differ from those of men. For instance, men tend to look for someone in a group to take responsibility, who can be blamed for any failure. Women, on the other hand, tend to see a

responsible person as 'one who does something when it needs to be done, and blaming never enters in'. (1992:141) Men typically are oriented towards a product-goal, whereby the ends justifies the means, whilst women follow a process orientation, whereby the goal can easily change according to need. Problems occur when, as happens in male-dominated systems, women's ways of working together are assumed to be invalid or inferior. (1992:142)

The observations made by Schaef resonate with the research findings of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule who, from the perspective of psychology, interviewed a cohort of women in the field of education. They note the need expressed even among the most privileged interviewees to be accepted as a 'person', as opposed to being oppressed or patronised: 'achievement does not guarantee self-esteem', and even highly competent females tend to underestimate their own abilities. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1986:196) Referring to the sphere of education, the researchers conclude that women can be helped to develop their own authentic voices where emphasis is given to: 'connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate'. (1986:229) Applying these findings to women experiencing Church, it might reasonably be asked whether and how women's tendency towards relationality bears upon models of community that best reflect the relational nature of the trinitarian God; and also whether the Church, in its patterns of relationships, can offer a useful model by which women might overcome their long history of self-effacement and low self-esteem and truly achieve full personhood in *imago Dei*.

### ***One To Another: Women And Men Working Together***

The trinitarian relationality of God cannot be taken as an exact blueprint for the structure and working of the Church as community. Human beings, as Kathryn Tanner remarks, 'do not have the same sort of relationship with members of the Trinity as the persons of the Trinity do, let alone that kind of relationship with one another'. (Tanner 2006:330) How, then, can a discourse about the trinitarian God move towards one about human relations? How to bridge that gap between a human society characterised by sin, suffering and conflict and that of the perfect, loving mutuality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? One strategy is to start with the economic Trinity – how the Trinity acts in entering the human world of sin for the purpose of salvation. In this scheme, as Tanner points out, 'Humans do not attain the heights of trinitarian relations by reproducing them but by being incorporated into them as the very creatures they are'. (2006:329) So human relations can be said to image the trinitarian God in ways appropriate to the fallenness and finitude of humankind.

This is the strategy adopted by LaCugna in *God For Us: The Trinity And Christian Life*, where she refers to the early development of trinitarian doctrine in order to reflect on the practical outworkings of faith as 'the life of God with us', a community of persons. (LaCugna 1991:381) She argues that the Trinity offers a 'critical principle against which we can measure present institutional arrangements'. (LaCugna 1993a:402) So in imagining a human community and its relations conforming to the divine perichoretic model, account must be taken that human relations can only ever aspire towards, rather than directly imitate, the perfect perichoretic unity in diversity of the Trinity. With this caveat in mind, I

suggest that the way individuals and groups work together can be examined with respect to the example of the Trinity.

An institution modelled on the perichoretic Trinity will not adopt liturgies and pastoral practices that promote oppression of or discrimination against particular individuals or groups. It will, rather, offer an example of inclusiveness, interdependence and collaboration amongst all its members. This is the type of structure that is now broadly accepted across a range of denominations as a good working model for church communities. Collaborative and facilitative styles of leadership in ministry are currently being propagated in the Anglican Church at diocesan level and are sought in ordinands at selection conferences.<sup>8</sup> Candidates are assessed on their commitment to interdependent ministry, to sensitivity and responsiveness to the community. To this end, there has been an increasing interest recently in the concept of collaborative ministry as a way for all members to work together to share their gifts so as to function well as Christ's Body. Collaborative developments have occurred largely as a response to the need for new forms of ministry in the face of social change and financial restrictions. Yet gender has also had a role to play. Hilary Wakeman, a priest and canon, notes that: 'the places where the idea of collaborative ministry has been most readily accepted tend to be also the places where the ministry of women has been accepted'. (Wakeman 1996:10) Conversely, where the authority of a single male leader is valued (usually either at the high Anglo-catholic or the low evangelical end of the church spectrum), there is more likely to be opposition to women as priests or leaders.

A proliferation of publications has been produced to assist in achieving the processes and skills necessary to exercise collaborative ministry effectively. Collaborative ministry refers to practices that involve people working together, using their gifts in a co-operative way that is most effective for the witness and mission of the Church. It is often used to refer specifically to clergy working with lay people, but I am using the term here to describe the practice of women and men (whether ordained or not) working side by side in partnership. Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano, in their guide to embarking on collaborative practices, maintain that collaboration requires the ability to act both cooperatively as well as independently. (1998:50) It involves a degree of risk-taking as well as being able to 'give and take', to share on the level of ideas, to be self-aware and comfortable with oneself and to be able to relate freely to others as equals. (1998:52-53) Obstacles to collaborative ministry, in the form of attitudes and behaviours, include over-competitiveness, arrogance and learned helplessness. (1998:26)

Gender differences in the working environment have been studied by Harriet Bradley, who found that men have tended to prefer all male working environments and have fought to keep women out of the workplace. They often

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<sup>8</sup> The *Criteria For Selection For Ministry In The Church Of England* (2005) stipulates that candidates should be assessed for their commitment to interdependent ministry, their responsiveness to and understanding of the community, their group skills and their ability to take up authority without being alienated or domineering. The document acknowledges that gender is among the factors that impact on the way leadership is perceived and offered. (2005:26)

view women as potentially disruptive and can treat them as outcasts unless they are prepared to join in with traditional male practices such as sexist chatter. If they refuse, women can be labelled as trouble-makers or as inferior workers. Work practices are typically defined in masculine terms and are a paramount example of androcentrism. Women's language is often seen by men as emotional and irrational, and therefore inferior, so that women must either talk naturally or adopt a male style which is seen as rational but unfeminine. (Bradley 1994:155) Getting onto the workplace at all can be a struggle for women. Rosemary Crompton, discussing women in the workplace from a sociological standpoint, refers to various research findings that demonstrate masculine exclusionary practices and structures which have led to an inferior employment situation for women. (Crompton 1997:2) Arthur T Himmelman, referring to the growing volume of literature exploring gender differences, concludes that collaborative processes led by women tend to move more quickly towards shared power, with higher levels of creative problem-solving and a greater emphasis on human rather than financial resources. Those led by men tend to be more limited to positional power and authority, to focus more on rules and regulations, and to stress financial rather than human resources. (Himmelman 1996:33)

It is evident from the research and anecdotal evidence I have sketched out that sexuate difference has a part to play in the practice of collaborative ministry, although this is not elaborated in any detail by Sofield and Juliano in their guide. Women and men have different ways of knowing and of relating, different needs and understandings in terms of identity and relationality. Chris Huxham, working in the field of management science, notes that, where collaborative processes are well-conducted, gender differences are acknowledged, understood and fully integrated. (Huxham 1996:33) A church institution adhering to values of inclusiveness, interdependence and collaboration amongst all members, as modelled by the Trinity, must by this evidence take full account of gender difference in order to concretise a principle of unity in diversity.

### ***Humankind And The Created World: The Imperative For Good Stewardship***

I have explored the human relationship with the divine and between one person or group and another. Now I consider the relationship between humankind and the created world. As the priest breaks and distributes the bread of the Eucharist, worshippers are reminded that bread, the staple of life, is a token of the gift of God's creation. God is the source of life. All things that have being have, as Philip Newell puts it, 'issued forth from God's life', and life itself 'has been expressed into being from the mystery of God'. (Newell 2000:79). The congregation gives thanks to God in the Eucharistic Prayer for the creation of all things and acknowledges God's great love and bounty in providing the cosmos and all that it holds.

Bread is also a reminder that life is sustained through good husbandry of the soil and other practices of appropriate collaboration with nature. The soil must be tilled and fed with care if it is to remain sufficiently fertile for crops. Since bread is perishable and must be made every day or so, it symbolises the responsibility to respect and care for the earth if it is to remain productive and supply us with the means of life. So the bread broken and shared at the Eucharist has

something to say also about good stewardship of the natural resources provided for us by God. It speaks too of the duty to share justly the resources available. God gives ample raw materials to feed and care for everyone; it is human agency that is responsible for ensuring their proper distribution and use. The ethical dimension of the liturgy is explicit; dependent as it is on the hope of the cross and the kingdom, it requires a response of commitment and action. I discussed earlier Ricoeur's notion of a language of hope focusing on a moment when the passion for the possible turns into action. In the Eucharist, that language of hope, remembering the past and looking to the future, is centred around the breaking of the bread and the response in the form of commitment to God and redemptive engagement with the world.

How can we share the bread of the Eucharist without being mindful of the many who remain hungry? How can we eat the bread without regard for the earth from which the grain flourished? How can we be thankful for the fruit of the earth without remembering God's creative work in all of life? How can we enjoy it without acknowledging our duty to preserve the earth's fruitfulness for future generations? It is these questions which spring out of the corporate nature of our worship, and remind us of our communal responsibilities as the Body of Christ, which must engage with issues of justice. Sean McDonagh argues that the Eucharist, the memorial of Christ's suffering and death, is a challenge to 'create patterns of human living, especially in the economic and social sphere, that are sensitive to other creatures and ecological sustainable'. (McDonagh 1999:213) A theology that seeks for the flourishing of God's creation embraces a love and concern for the natural world. It demands also a respect for life that calls for action to value and protect all creatures that inhabit the world. The future of the human race depends on the way in which it stewards the earth. Hence ecology is essentially concerned with justice for the non-human as well as the human world.<sup>9</sup>

If the Eucharist is indeed a transformational rite, then there can be no concern about unjust social conditions without a concomitant challenge to those conditions and the structures that perpetuate them. And a move away from injustice must include addressing harm done to the natural environment: that is, where human activity has led to unnecessary and degrading impacts on natural habitats and wildlife. One cannot acknowledge oneself in the image of God, or creation as formed by God, without also acknowledging a duty of care towards creation. Human dignity and the welfare of the natural world are inseparably linked. Newell describes this relationship thus:

The way we treat the body of creation is...the way we treat the body of humanity. If we increasingly cut ourselves off from the glory that is in the earth and in one another, we will come to live as if the glory is not there. (Newell 2000:103)

The question of stewardship of the natural world has become a crucial one with the rapid development of science and technology, disciplines which have grown

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<sup>9</sup> 'Ecology' literally means the science of houses (*oikos*) and by extension the study of the space in which we live. It is the science of the relationships and processes that connect all living creatures and their habitats. It looks at nature as a whole, cohesive and infinitely relational system, in which humanity is one element. (Halkes 1991:93)

exponentially in the western post-Enlightenment period largely without regard to a commensurate duty to care for the earth. Melvyn Matthews writes that pre-Enlightenment thought saw the universe as 'alive with the praise of God', whereas, post-Enlightenment, nature was regarded as 'neutral or dead'. (Matthews 2000:49)<sup>10</sup> Nature was often seen as in opposition to humanity, fit to be controlled by humans rather than to be collaborated with.<sup>11</sup> The command to 'subdue the earth' (Gen 1:28) was largely taken as a prerogative to dominate and overcome nature in an effort to conquer the world. (Moltmann 1985:21)

Whilst science offered liberation from the religious dogma and superstition that was prevalent in medieval times, it brought also a sense of alienation from the world. The whole cosmos could be seen as a mechanistic, impersonal phenomenon devoid of divine guidance or spiritual status. Nature and the universe, previously seen as corrupt, now came to be regarded as something to be 'mastered' and then (following Darwin) as something with no higher purpose, caused by random processes of evolution. The natural world was seen to operate according to mathematical laws that could be deduced and manipulated by science, and thus exploited for economic gain. Nature was regarded as under the technological control of the human elite. American writer Annie Proulx captures this attitude in her novel *That Old Ace In The Hole*, in which a young man, Moises Harshberger, arrives in Texas in 1879 seeking to make his fortune from cattle ranching. He sets about erecting fences on the land he has acquired:

in fencing the land a certain balance shifted. Now Harshberger felt that the land was servant to him and it owed him a living, owed him everything he could get from it. (Proulx 2002:86)

The drive by those in power to dominate rather than to collaborate with nature and with other people can often lead to poor stewardship.<sup>12</sup> Domination rather than collaboration is a common theme in many recent global ecological crises, from overpopulation and famine to labour exploitation, deforestation and pollution. The high consumption of energy and high levels of waste in the first world are challenged as unsustainable phenomena that cannot be extended to other areas without further degradation of the biota. Mounting levels of debt keep developing nations in poverty and economic instability. Wars rage

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<sup>10</sup> Matthews traces the pre-Enlightenment attitude to creation back to the fathers of the Early Church, who took the view that all of creation prayed. He argues that when we pray, we are joining in the primary speech of creation and returning to 'hearing and responding to the speech of God'. (Matthews 2000:50)

<sup>11</sup> According to Ruether, it was with Cartesian dualism and Newtonian physics that nature became 'dead stuff moving obediently according to mathematical laws knowable to a new male elite of scientists'. [www.spunk.org/library/pub/openeye/sp000943.txt](http://www.spunk.org/library/pub/openeye/sp000943.txt) p.4 (accessed 01.11.00).

<sup>12</sup> Management practices that degrade the land to the point of non-viability for human or wildlife survival are not confined to modern industrialised societies. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance, the people who carved the giant stone heads (moai) on Easter Island so depleted the soil and deforested the land that shortage of food led to dramatic depopulation. <http://ask.yahoo.com/ask/20010831.html> (accessed 28.05.07)



between nations whilst their natural resources are continually being depleted. Rising temperatures caused by an increase in 'greenhouse gases' are likely to change the growing patterns of arable crops and to threaten the livelihood of subsistence farmers. Flooding caused by rising temperatures displaces people living on flood plains, especially in poorer areas with no flood alleviation measures in place. River pollution diminishes the biomass of flora and fauna associated with it and threatens the health and lives of those dependent upon it, especially where there is no access to treated water. Damming and water-extraction from rivers cause water shortage for human communities and adverse ecological impacts to wildlife habitats further down the watercourses. Overgrazing can lead to desertification and diminishment of biodiversity. Burning of fossil fuels produces acid rain which has damaged large areas of forest in eastern Europe and has reduced fish stocks in parts of Scandinavia and Canada. (Stevens & Kelley 1992:125) Non-sustainable destruction of tropical forests degrades the biota, erodes the soil, and deprives those who live in these areas of their homes and livelihood.<sup>13</sup>

A will to dominate nature and other people is a characteristic of patriarchal society which tends to view the world in terms of hierarchical structures and competitive practices. Such a logic has led to unjust systems that oppress those least valued and respected. It is often the land and its associated biomass, women and children who suffer because they are the voiceless, the least powerful and the most vulnerable. Catharina Halke argues that the current ecological crisis is caused by 'the absence of justice, peace and particularly of reverence and respect for creation', and by 'the disastrous one-sidedness of our culture...characterised by a predominantly masculine outlook on life'. (Halke 1991:1) Women and children, for instance, are usually the ones to fetch water, and often have long distances to walk to collect it. Nearly 6,000 children a day die from diarrhoea, caused by lack of access to clean drinking water and health education. (Wroe & Doney 2004:32) Women, as primary carers in poor communities, are often the first to suffer the effects of environmental degradation caused by industrial practices or military activity. Girls still suffer from lack of educational opportunities, although it has been shown that investment in girls' education is the single most effective way of reducing poverty. (Wroe & Doney 2004:35)<sup>14</sup>

From a post-modern standpoint, there is an increasing awareness of the dehumanising and degrading effects of that headlong drive towards domination which pays no regard to stewardship. Human activity now poses the greatest threat to the survival of certain species and habitats, and indeed of the planet

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<sup>13</sup> Vandana Shiva maintains that up to 50% of all living things (i.e. at least five million species) are estimated to inhabit tropical forests, which carry an unparalleled diversity of species. One species per day is thought to be lost, and twelve million hectares of land deteriorate into desert able to support minimal vegetation. (Shiva 1989:xv)

<sup>14</sup> Girls with some schooling are more likely to have smaller, healthier families, to send their children to school, to experience lower infant mortality and to avoid HIV/AIDS. (Wroe & Doney 2004:35-6)

itself.<sup>15</sup> Those with the greatest wealth and power often fail to recognise the damage and destruction caused by ignoring our interdependency, since the effects are masked by technology and are remote from modern first-world life. Patterns of trade, industry and agriculture are pushing to its limits the regenerative capacity of the biota.<sup>16</sup>

The imperative to re-think the human relationship with nature has become increasingly urgent as science and technology have become ever more powerful. Such a case was made as early as 1949 by Aldo Leopold in his seminal work *A Sand County Almanac*, in which he calls for the development of an ecological ethic. He lists the ecological catastrophes that have occurred when people have disregarded the need for collaboration with nature. Leopold was concerned that as the cultural base shifted with advancing civilisation, people loosened their connection with the earth, so imperilling an awareness of their origins and their fundamental reliance on the biota. Ethics for an ecologist originates in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups towards forms of co-operation, or symbioses. Human interactions are symbiotic where outright competition is overtaken by co-operation. Although increasingly complex co-operative mechanisms developed with the growth of human populations and the development of science and technology, Leopold saw no equivalent ethic dealing with humans' relationship to land and wildlife: 'The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations'. (Leopold 1970:238) Human interaction with the biotic community that encourages diversity and stability is deemed good and moral; it is immoral where it undermines the biotic community.

Another influential writer from the USA, Rachel Carson, brought attention to the relationship between the use of toxic chemicals in agricultural practice and the decline in wildlife species and diversity. Carson makes the case that human beings are part of the ecosystem and so must behave towards the earth in a way that its conditions for existence are not violated. Julian Huxley, writing the preface for the book's 1963 British edition, points to particular examples in the UK of loss of wildlife due to use of chemical pesticides; these include the decline of many butterfly species, cuckoos, and hedgerow and meadow flora. (Carson 1963:19-20) Lord Shackleton's Introduction to the same edition highlights the disappearance over large parts of Britain of the peregrine, 'typical of the change in our countryside which is being wrought by toxic chemicals'. (1963:13)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> EO Wilson maintains that humankind has been responsible for the latest wave of species extinctions, 'rushing to eternity a large fraction of our fellow species in a single generation'. (1992:30) He argues that biodiversity must be preserved at all costs, not least because biological wealth, as yet not as valued as material and cultural wealth, provides us with food, medicine and other amenities. (1992:297)

<sup>16</sup> Ruether points out that the current economic system relies on exploitation of the land and labour of many for the benefit of the few, and that present levels of energy consumption and of waste 'cannot be expanded to include the poor without destroying the basis of life of the planet itself.' [www.spunk.org/library/pub/openeye/sp000943.txt](http://www.spunk.org/library/pub/openeye/sp000943.txt) p.4 (accessed 01.11.00)

<sup>17</sup> Since the 80% decrease in the peregrine population in the late 1950s, numbers slowly recovered following the banning of DDT and other toxic pesticides. By the late 1990s

Philosophy and theology have latterly begun to respond and contribute to the growing environmental debate. A quest for 'mastery' of the environment – to the point where the world itself could be destroyed – is these days being challenged by a theology that seeks to collaborate with nature and with humanity, and to allow the earth and all beings to flourish, so that both humanity and nature will survive.<sup>18</sup> Much of the argument on the association between religion and ecology takes as its starting point the principle of *dominium terrae*, the injunction in the creation story that defines the relationship between human beings and the earth:

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. (Gen 1:28)

Halkes records that, until the 1970s, not a single monograph existed in the realm of theology relating to *dominium terrae*. The term was absent from the registers of theological dictionaries. (Halkes 1989:80) Rather, the prevailing Judaeo-Christian worldview was criticised as contributing to the gathering ecological crises. For example, Lynn White, in his classic statement of 1967, concluded that Christianity, in contrast to other religions such as paganism, established a dualism of humankind and nature based on the concept of people created in God's image. Man (to use White's terminology) was intended by God to exploit nature purely for his own ends. Hence the developing powers of science and technology are based on a Christian ethic which must bear a large share of the blame for current misuse of the earth's resources.<sup>19</sup> Halkes finds it not surprising that Christian theology and philosophy have been blamed for the current ecological crisis, since nature and the cosmos have for so long hardly figured in such studies.

The assumption that nature could be possessed, dominated and controlled is now largely accepted to be ill-conceived and erroneous; and Christians have latterly developed theologies that privilege the imperative to steward the earth above the will to dominate it. They have joined those voices speaking out against the seemingly inevitable tide of humanity's disastrous rush to dominate nature, and have been heard with increasing respect. Jim Ball, for instance, notes that Francis Schaefer spoke at Wheaton College on pollution as an ethical

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numbers reached pre-decline levels over much of their former range. There are now estimated to be over 1,200 pairs in the UK  
[http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/guide/p/peregrine/conservation\\_action.asp](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/guide/p/peregrine/conservation_action.asp) (accessed 29.04.06)

<sup>18</sup> There is also a growing political will to address environmental degradation and climate change. For instance, 34 countries ratified the 1997 Kyoto agreement to meet emissions reduction targets of all greenhouse gases by 2012 relative to 1990 levels.  
<http://www.climate-concern.com/Kyoto%20Agreement.htm> (accessed 17.04.07).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.bemidjistate.edu/peoplenv/lynnwhite.htm> (accessed 24.04.06). White's omission of any discussion about stewardship in relation to *dominium terrae* underlines the fact that this issue had barely surfaced in the Christian theological academy.

issue in 1968;<sup>20</sup> and that, also in the USA, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention both passed resolutions on creation-care issues as early as 1970.<sup>21</sup> Carol Merchant demonstrates in her book *The Death Of Nature* a long tradition in philosophy of understanding humankind's ultimate responsibility to God as stewards of creation. (Merchant 1980:246)<sup>22</sup> Merchant sees Leopold's community-centred 'land ethic' as an alternative to a homocentric ethic of ecosystem management. (1980/90:252) The development of environmental sciences during the latter half of the last century has served to demonstrate what bad stewards of the earth humankind has been. Merchant, in her preface to the second edition of *The Death Of Nature* in 1990, gives examples of how the global ecological crises had deepened since the book's first publication a decade earlier. Listing ozone depletion, carbon dioxide buildup, acid rain and other environmentally damaging phenomena, she maintains that the health of the entire planet is in danger, and that 'A new partnership between humans and the earth is urgently needed'. (1980/90:xv)

Aware of humankind's destructive lack of empathy with creation, theologians have recently found fresh insights in the ethic of *dominium terrae* and the imperative to steward the earth justly. For instance, a statement by the Roman Catholic International Theological Commission, acknowledging the resurgence of interest since Vatican council II in the theme of *imago Dei*, reaffirms the duty of humans in being created in the image of God to 'exercise, in God's name, responsible stewardship of the created world'. (RCITC 2002:1) The development (or re-discovery) of such an ethic has led to a re-visiting of ancient creation stories that tell of human origins and the need for people to be in relation to each other and to the earth.<sup>23</sup> These stories can serve as landmarks in the search to re-member that pre-lapsarian harmony and intimacy between God and people, people and nature.

The account of the Fall in the Judaeo-Christian creation story illustrates the consequences of the historic imbalance between people and nature, men and women. Wilful disruption of our intimate relationship with our Creator causes a degradation of the God-given, harmonious relationship between humans and

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<sup>20</sup> The lectures were later published as *Pollution And The Death Of Man: The Christian View Of Ecology* London: Hodder & Stoughton 1970.

<sup>21</sup> Ball, Jim 'Introduction to Papers presented at the first National Association of Evangelicals conference, Lincoln and Grimsby Methodist District, [http://www.lgmethodistdistrict.org.uk/district/content/care\\_of\\_creation.asp](http://www.lgmethodistdistrict.org.uk/district/content/care_of_creation.asp) (accessed 27.04.06).

<sup>22</sup> Merchant mentions, for instance, William Derham who, in his book *Physico-Theology* (1713) argued for a 'managerial framework of ecologically sound principles, in a managerial framework of stewardship modelled on man's role as caretaker of God's creation'. (Merchant 1980:248)

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Ruether, Rosemary R (1985/96) *Womanguides: Readings Towards A Feminist Theology* Boston: Beacon Press pp.37-60; Primavesi, Anne (1991) *From Apocalypse To Genesis: Ecology, Feminism And Christianity* Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, chap. 10-12.

with the created world. The story of the Fall and eviction from Eden tells of an incomplete and dysfunctional relationship, both with God, between human groups and between humanity and the earth. This broken relationship is pivotal to the history of humanity. As Phyllis Tribble explains in her interpretation of the Fall, whereas in creation woman and man know harmony and equality, 'in sin they know alienation and discord', and see 'how terrible life has become as it stands between creation and grace'. (1992:80) Our overweening desire to play God, to misuse our freedom, to put ourselves first, to dominate the powerless is inextricably bound up with the competition and distrust that exists between the sexes and with the domination and denigration by one of the other and by people of the earth. A redemptive *metanoia* must entail a righting of the fallen relationship with creation towards an ethic of stewardship that enables all creatures, human and non-human, to flourish.

Mindful that much long-term forecasting has predicted the dire consequences of poor environmental management, efforts have been made by both scientists and theologians to establish an ecologically sensitive ethic that bears upon human interaction with nature.<sup>24</sup> The imperative to care for creation was highlighted by Archbishop Rowan Williams in a lecture given at Lambeth Palace in July 2004. Here, he spoke of creation existing 'because God speaks: in both Hebrew and Christian Scripture, the Word of God is the foundation of everything'. (Williams 2004:2)<sup>25</sup> Creation is part of divine self-giving, and to 'respond appropriately to creation is part of responding appropriately to God' (2004:2) Our horizon, then, must be to live in tune with the universe that God has created, and to share with others the divine generosity evident in the created world. (2004:3) Yet through sin humans have failed to live up to the calling of living in harmony with the environment, treating it not as gift but as a consumer item to be dominated and used at will. The refusal of responsibility is reversed in the self-giving of Jesus, through whom humankind has the hope of reconciliation with the Creator. In our communion with Christ through the Eucharist, we see, according to Williams,

the destiny of all material things, which is to be effective signs of an accepting love that uses the material environment to express grace and justice. (2004:4)

The human vocation, as part of the redemptive journey, is to right the fallen relationship between humankind and the created world, to liberate the earth and all its creatures from oppressive, unjust, destructive structures, and to enable a transformation towards the wholeness that God intends for all creation. For Williams, the connection between ecology and justice is both axiomatic and increasingly urgent: 'irresponsible treatment of the environment both reflects and encourages an oppressive politics.'(2004:4). There is now, according to many scientists, a crisis point where the biota 'is no longer able to cope with

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<sup>24</sup> Wilson has since proposed an ethic relating to biodiversity that is based on the imperative of prudence: that is, recognising the great value of biodiversity; always preventing species extinction where possible; and restoring natural environments to 'stanch the haemorrhaging of biological wealth'. (Wilson 1992:335)

<sup>25</sup> The full lecture is available, [www.churchtimes.co.uk/80256e4e00384246/httppublicpages/ddcec1c0bae1e7238025ecb004a13](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/80256e4e00384246/httppublicpages/ddcec1c0bae1e7238025ecb004a13) (accessed 12.07.04).

undisciplined human will'. (2004:4) What is at stake, then, is not only the degradation of the biota, but 'our continuance as a species capable of some vision of universal justice', rather than a world of spiralling inequalities where humans are regarded as dispensable. (2004:5) Williams calls for environmental issues to be taken seriously, and for the Church to witness as a model for blessing and justice, both in its worship and in its practical engagement with such issues, whether at a local or global level. (2004:7) His recognition of environmental crises highlights the lack of interest in and failure of respect for nature thus far shown by many within and outside the Church, where demands of justice in meeting an ethic of stewardship have historically been lacking.<sup>26</sup>

That the Anglican Church has begun to take environmental responsibility seriously is evidenced by the post of policy advisor to the Archbishop's Council on science, medicine, technology and the environment. Clair Foster has held this post since 1999 (pers com 2004), and her mandate covers both global and local concerns. She attended the congress in South Africa in 2002, where attention was paid to worldwide environmental justice. In one of the debates, Bishop Geoff Davies, speaking of dominion as a mandate to care for all creation, proposed that a resolution be sent to the United Nations to urge all nations to protect threatened wildlife.<sup>27</sup> Many Christian denominations, charities and aid agencies are now appealing for governments to mitigate the impact of climate change on poor people and developing nations.<sup>28</sup>

Nearer to home, Foster has defended the moral argument for making church buildings in this country more sustainable. In an interview with John Coutts for *The Church Times*, she stated that 'taking care of creation in whatever form it presents itself to you is part of what it means to be a Christian.' (Coutts, 'Switching On The Green Light', 18 June 2004, no.7371). I have already noted Archbishop Rowan Williams' plea to the international community to 'look for a new level of public seriousness about environmental issues'.<sup>29</sup> An example of concern by the Church for the environment is the growing recognition of 'Environment Sunday' (previously 'Conservation Sunday'), usually the first Sunday of June, when issues relating to ecology and stewardship are raised during the service. Parishes who want to become more environmentally aware can use the EcoCongregation environmental programme, available free of charge, whose aim is to make stewardship a key lifestyle and missionary

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<sup>26</sup> The ethic of stewardship reaches beyond the field of theology. The biologist EO Wilson, for instance, advocates the ethic of stewardship as 'a domain on the near side of metaphysics where all reflective persons can surely find common ground'. (Wilson 1992:335)

<sup>27</sup> [www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/30/75/acns3097.html](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/30/75/acns3097.html) (accessed August 2006).

<sup>28</sup> For instance, Tearfund has launched a climate-change adaptation guide for aid agencies; Christian Aid, sponsored by the World Council Of Churches, is looking at the link between climate change and development; the National Council Of Churches in the USA has asked the government to address the impact of global warming on the world's poor, elderly and young (reported in Church Times, 13 April 2007, p.5).

<sup>29</sup> [www.churchtimes.co.uk](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk) (accessed 12.07.04).

activity. The programme includes an audit to identify current environmental practice and to develop priorities for action in areas including worship, theology, education and outreach.<sup>30</sup>

As recent developments in ecology and other sciences have demonstrated the profound interrelation between humankind and the rest of the biota, so creation-based theology has underlined the special responsibility humans have, as God's creatures, for the survival and well-being of the planet. The bread of the Eucharist, symbolising the gifts of creation, is a reminder of human kinship and interdependence with the natural environment and of the divine imperative to care for the created world and to heal humanity's broken relationship with nature. It is also a reminder of human interdependence between labour and the supply of daily needs. As such it stands for the calling to work for a just and harmonious world where no one powerful group will dominate at the expense of other people or at an unsustainable cost to nature. It also symbolises the calling to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable and excluded. McDonagh has written that the Eucharist challenges us to 'create patterns of human living especially in the economic and social sphere, that are sensitive to other creatures and ecologically sustainable'. (McDonagh 1999:213) In this view, part of the redemptive process for those sharing table fellowship is to work for a just and harmonious relationship between people and with nature.

### ***Humankind And The Created World: An Ecofeminist Response***

A re-remembering by the community of faith of the intimate relationship between humankind and nature has been a priority of some strands of feminism. Ruether, for instance, warns that ignoring the connection with nature will lead to destruction of that which perpetuates life on the planet. Rather, she argues, we must 'sustain human and natural life in harmonious interconnection in our time, so that it can be passed on in a viable form for our children'. (Ruether 1985:105) For Ruether our ethical response to our relationship with nature begins with liturgy. Traditional liturgy, she finds, is inadequate with regard to hallowing creation. Hence she has developed new liturgies that retain the historical and eschatological ritual of the Jewish and Christian traditions but also borrow from 'religions that have remained close to nature and have sought to fit humanity into the rhythms and disciplines of nature'. (1985:104) Reclaiming a healthy relationship with nature, Ruether argues, must involve eradicating current systems of oppression and, acknowledging historical failings, finding new ways of relating with nature. In societies that are increasingly dominated by developing technologies, there has been a tendency to retreat from contact with the natural environment, and so to underplay the deep connection between humankind and the rest of creation.

Irigaray, in seeking to develop an ethics of sexuality, traces the lack of respect for nature to the 'neglect [of] the genealogy of the woman, which has been collapsed inside the man's'. (Irigaray 1993c:3) When women bear children within the genealogy of the husband, according to Irigaray, there is a change in understanding of the earth's fertility and of the divine within nature and women. (1993:3) Jantzen similarly criticises western thought and philosophy of religion for its lack of acknowledgement of 'our deep dependence on the ecosystem or

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.ecocongregation.org> (accessed 30.03.06).

our close connection with animals, taking instead an attitude of mastery or dominance and ultimately escape'. (Jantzen 1998b:115) Jantzen sees an awareness of human kinship with the created world as an antidote to the alienation felt in today's technological society, an alienation that she perceives as a continuation of the 'Christian hostility to the world' brought about by an emphasis on immortality. (1998b:115) For Jantzen and others, ecology is central to a feminist worldview: 'A feminist philosophy of religion centred in a symbolic of natality must include a recovery of...kinship with the world'. (1998b:115)

Jantzen makes a link between the environment and the history of spirituality. In her view, the privatisation of spirituality, for instance with a growing predominance of only private devotional reading, leads to 'a reinforcement of the societal status quo', and an inertia in tackling injustices where they are evident. (1995:21) In being concerned with the relationship between the individual and the transcendent, there is a danger in losing sight of the importance of the human relationship with the created world. Yet public worship makes this connection explicit. The Eucharist, always and essentially a corporate act, confirms the corporate quality of the Church and of the duty of care towards the earth as part of the redemptive process that reconciles all of creation with the Creator.

The work of feminist theologians such as those referred to here has paralleled the trend to treat ecology and other environmental sciences as serious and rigorous disciplines. These studies have begun to demonstrate something of the infinite complexity and finely-balanced nature of the relationship between living organisms and the earth, and the imperative for humankind to husband the earth wisely for the sake of all its inhabitants. McDonagh suggests that the human relationship with the earth should begin, not with the prideful notion of humans as 'above' nature, but with the notion of a profound sense of individual and collective humility. The word's derivation from the Latin term *humus* (soil) should, he argues, provide a 'valuable corrective', reminding us that, 'like every other creature on the planet, we are creatures of the soil and responsible to God for our actions'. (McDonagh 1999:199) McDonagh argues that a more humble attitude towards creation will underline the value of science and technology when used to understand and collaborate with nature, and the danger of these disciplines when used for short-term benefits without regard to the health of the earth. (1999:200).

In dialogue with religion, ecology has shown up the error of an exclusively anthropocentric ethic that sees the earth simply as a resource for humans, without regard to the earth's intrinsic value. (Eaton 2001:83) As McFague points out, 'we are not lords *over* the planet, but products *of* its processes'. (McFague 1993:6) Recent scientific research has shown how humans, along with other forms of life, are all an integral part of a vastly complex ecosystem, whose interconnections are much more intricate than was ever previously imagined.<sup>31</sup> Fresh insights in the fields of ecology, botany and biology have shown how dynamic and interdependent are the huge numbers of species and habitats on earth. There is now an understanding of how fragile they are, and how

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Wilson, EO (1992) *The Diversity Of Life* London: Penguin Books.



vulnerable to the adverse impact of human activity. A new awareness has grown of the value of nature not only for human needs but also in its own right. An ecology-based ethic calls for a recognition of nature's intrinsic value and for nature to be respected and safeguarded rather than dominated and unsustainably exploited. There are evidently connections to be made between the logic of domination by humankind of the earth, and between different human groups, including women and men, rich and poor and so on. Feminists interested in ecology have been attempting, as Merchant puts it, to 'overturn modern constructions of nature and women as culturally passive and subordinate'. (Merchant 1980/90:xvi)<sup>32</sup> Their success is perhaps in part apparent in the recent emergence of female ecological activists all over the world. (1980:xv)<sup>33</sup>

The link between the perceived cultural and symbolic closeness of women to the earth, the domination of women by men, and the exploitation of nature by patriarchal societies is a concern of ecofeminism.<sup>34</sup> Ecofeminist theology seeks to affirm the goodness of all creation, especially by developing non-dualistic concepts of redemption. (Watson 2003:50). It challenges those tendencies in Christian and Jewish theologies that, as Watson puts it, 'sacralize the domination and negation of bodies, the earth and women'. (2003:50) A sacramental understanding that all creation is inherently sacred is drawn on (for instance, by McFague and Ruether) to more adequately understand the relation between human beings and the natural world. (Ross 1998:178) According to Anne Primavesi, the sort of ecology implicit in the term ecofeminism is a refusal to

fragment the world by separating human beings from inert matter and other living organisms in a way which distances them 'above', 'apart from' or 'beyond' the natural systems of which they are part. (Primavesi 1991:24)

The type of feminism to which ecofeminism alludes is, maintains Primavesi, a refusal to remain as 'other', or to be defined in relation to men: hence ecofeminism's concern to challenge assumptions of men's dominance of women

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<sup>32</sup> Primavesi notes that in Latin and Greek, and in languages of medieval Europe, nature was a feminine noun, and so personified as female. Merchant sees the subordinate view of women and nature developing between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when 'the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its center [sic] gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was reconstructed as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans'. (Merchant 1980/90:xv).

<sup>33</sup> Merchant cites examples of ecological activism from Sweden (protests against herbiciding forests) to India (the Chipko tree-hugging movement) and Greenham Common in England. (Merchant 1980/90:xv)

<sup>34</sup> Ruether gives a full definition along these lines, [www.spunk.org/library/pubs/openeye/sp000943.txt](http://www.spunk.org/library/pubs/openeye/sp000943.txt) (accessed 01.11.00). The term ecofeminism was first used in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne, who urged women to lead a practical ecological revolution through *ecofeminisme*. (Celia Deane-Drummond 2002:190) It was developed in the USA by Ynestra King at the Institute For Social Ecology in Vermont, and in 1980 a major conference on ecofeminism was held. (Merchant 1992:184)

or the earth, whether in language, science, religion or any other field. (1991:25) She argues that patriarchy has historically fostered a form of moral totalitarianism that has become part of the Christian ethical response to the natural world, and which assumes the subordination of women and of nature. (1991:200) Ecofeminism, by contrast, 'seeks to celebrate women's affinity with the natural world and to use it to break down the conventional boundary between nature and culture'. (Primavesi 1996:45)

Crucial to ecofeminism is the recognition of the interconnectedness of all things, so that theology must include the whole of creation. (Watson 2003:50-51) Indeed creation becomes the centre of focus for this theology, and ecological and cosmic sustainability are of more immediate concern than personal immortality. As Valerie Karris puts it, 'realised eschatology has become the ethical culmination of ecofeminism'. (2002:243) The horizon for ecofeminists is a return to the harmony prevailing before humankind's degradation of nature, this time with humanity 'fulfilling its symbiotic potential'. (Karris 2002:244) Humanity, traditionally understood as the apex of creation, now becomes, for instance with McFague and Ruether, an interwoven and interdependent part of creation. (Karris 2002:243) Since ecofeminism recognises that humanity and nature are deeply connected, and since it is driven by praxis as well as being informed by theoretical analysis, it is concerned with environmental degradation caused by the logic of patriarchal domination. A connection is made between the domination of women's bodies and women's work, and the exploitation of land, water and animals. Ruether, for instance, questions: 'How have women as a gender group been colonized by patriarchy as a legal, economic, social and political system?' (Ruether 2003:24) She looks to Christian religion as 'a prime source of the cultural symbolic patterns which have inferiorized women and nature'. (2003:25)

Ecofeminists see current social and environmental crises largely as the product of the human desire to dominate nature and other human beings. (Green 1996:62) It is humankind's responsibility to repair the damage caused by the sin of wilful domination. (Green 1996:62) All human beings must participate in what Elizabeth Green calls the 'mending of God's creation'. (1996:62) Russell, who also uses this term, finds in it evidence for a biblical message of liberation for women and all marginalised groups: 'the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of New Creation that impels my life'. (Russell 1985:138) Such a vision impels women and men together to be co-creators with God in actualising reconciliation between humankind, the world and God. For Russell, the scriptures provide the source of meaning and hope that will allow all people to be partners in the mending of creation: that is, 'a restoration of wholeness, peace and justice in the world'. (1985:138) The process of mending God's creation cannot, then, incorporate anything that denies God's intention 'for the liberation of groaning creation in all its parts'. (1985:139)

It is apparent that Jantzen's concepts of natality and of flourishing are appropriate to the ecofeminist understanding of a 'here-and-now' realised eschatology. Flourishing assumes an original human goodness and a concern for social and environmental justice. (Watson 2003:89) Achieving reconciliation and harmonisation between nature and humankind would, according to ecofeminism, lead to the flourishing of life for the planet as a whole and also for human beings. Flourishing can take place only where all forms of life, and all

types of people, are valued and cared for. It follows that flourishing, in this sense, depends on the recognition of the intrinsic status and value both of women, of other non-normative groups, such as children, and of nature. Flourishing is constrained where the values of love, justice and care for each other are proclaimed by patriarchal religion yet are not fully extended to women (and other non-normative groups) and to the earth. From the ecofeminist perspective, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, colonialism and ecological exploitation are all part of the interchange of self-sustaining domination and oppression from which we should strive to be liberated. (Eaton 2001:75) Ecofeminists attempt to address these issues from widely inter-disciplinary points of view, from history and natural science to the arts and liturgy. (Eaton 1998:87) This approach is seen as vital since, as Heather Eaton points out, 'the ideology of domination ...is materialised in cultural structures and praxis'. (Eaton 1998:93)

In response to the oppression of women and of nature, many ecofeminists seek to develop an environmental ethic of non-dominating care and nurture which, as Merchant describes, 'arises out of women's culturally constructed experiences'. (Merchant 1992:185) Merchant lists practical evidence of this kind of ethic, including restraints on forest felling and river damning, and curbs on environmentally-damaging technologies. (1992:188) She mentions, among other environmental initiatives led by women, the Greenbelt Movement headed by Wangari Maathai.###see imago dei chap. (1992:2003) Maathai, in her autobiography, makes the link between lack of women's perceived status and value in her homeland, Kenya, the degradation of biodiversity, largely through deforestation, and the suppression of democratic rights by a brutal government. The Green Belt Movement which she instigated has spread across Africa and has helped rural women to restore indigenous forests by planting trees which generate an income for them. The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Maathai for her contribution to sustainable development, human rights and peace.<sup>35</sup> Merchant lists among the movement's achievements the planting of millions of saplings, creation of hundreds of jobs, education on environmental care and promotion of independence and enhancement of the image of women. (Merchant 1992:2003)

Grey argues that a renewed way of overcoming our estrangement from nature is part of the whole process of redemption, since nature 'is part of the whole creative/redemptive process'. (Grey 1989:39) This is where 'the healing must begin' (1989:41). For Grey, women have always engaged in this redemptive work because of their 'living contact with natural processes'. (1989:42)

The scientist Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989), provides an example of the praxis of aiming to live in harmony with nature in culturally hostile environments. Shiva, described by Primavesi as 'One of the most influential figures in ecofeminism today', (Primavesi 1996:47) writes from her involvement with women's struggles for survival in India through the 1980s. The book questions the status of science and development as universal categories of progress, and argues that they are actually projects of modern western patriarchy, with their inherent inequalities of

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<sup>35</sup> See Maathai, Wangari (2007) *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* London: William Heinemann.

gender, race and class. (Shiva 1989:xiv) Like Merchant, Shiva traces the rise of a patriarchal science of nature back to the European scientific revolution, which 'transformed *terrae mater* into a machine and a source of raw material'. (1989:xvii) By contrast, she sees the day-to-day struggles of women, particularly in India, to protect nature as part of the recovery of the 'feminine principle from which all life arises'. (1989:xviii) Her book attempts to show 'how ecological destruction and the marginalisation of women are not inevitable, economically or scientifically'. (1989:xvii) In the Forward to Shiva's book, Rajni Kothari maintains that

Femininity is a struggle for a certain basic principle of perceiving life, a philosophy of being...that can serve not just women but all human beings. Femininity ...should not be a limiting value but an expanding one – holistic, eclectic, trans-specific and encompassing of diverse stirrings. (1989:xiii)

Ecofeminist activists are at the vanguard of the realisation that generations have for too long prostituted the earth's resources to satisfy human greed. From a Christian perspective, the prophetic call to 'do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God' (Mic. 6:8) must embrace redemption from idolatrous practices that lead to broken human relationships and to potentially disastrous consequences for the planet. The idolatry, in this case, from which the Bride of Christ is redeemed, is that of domination, oppression and injustice, whether by one group of another or by humankind of the earth. The fine linen worn by the Bride of Christ is made up of the 'righteous deeds of the saints' (Rev 19:8). In this context, these righteous acts comprise the work people do, on the journey towards redemption, to rid the world of dehumanising ideologies that harm people, the biota and all living things, so that all life can flourish in the way that God intended.

## CHAPTER 8

# BROKEN BODY, BROKEN WORLD – THE WOMAN PRIEST

### *‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you’*

I have argued that feminist theologies, earthed as they are in the concrete, broken world, make a major contribution to the way that Christians understand relationships with the divine, with one another and with creation. Here I examine whether the priest who is a woman, and whom culture therefore tends to associate with nature, the material and corporeal, can be seen as a symbolic focus for such an embodied and earthed interpretation of the role of the Church, the Bride and Body of Christ.

### ***Humankind And The Divine: A Refigured Interpretation Of Redemption***

A feminist theology of priesthood must, I suggest, take account of human embodiment, in all its forms, as the prime locus for the human encounter with and aspiration towards the divine. Is there a particular role for the woman priest in this more concrete, tangible reading of redemption, which leads to a concern for in transformative action in the here and now rather than to anticipation of a promise of immortality? Certainly, feminist theologies tend to be more interested in redemption as an immanent process: that is, in the nurture of life rather than in the possibility of achieving autonomy or individual transcendence. (Raphael 1996b:200) Indeed, the concept of a transcendent God is rather a problematic one in feminist theologies with their emphasis on the material, the experiential and the bodily.

For Irigaray, transcendence is necessary to subjectivity. She posits a conception of subjectivity in which transcendence is grounded in, rather than antithetical to, immanence. Hence her writing opens up the possibility of a philosophy of religion that values both human corporeality and, at the same time, transcendence; the two are not in opposition. On the other hand, as a pantheist, Jantzen understands the divine as entirely immanent, inseparable from the world and the material. She is impatient with a traditional philosophy of religion that argues endlessly about the salvation of immortal souls ‘in a world where many of the souls being discussed would find salvation here and now in a bowl of food’. (Jantzen 1998b:111) For Jantzen, Ruether and other feminist writers, redemption does not descend from above but comes from the fabric of life in the context of the whole created order. A consequence is to bring salvation down to earth, so that, as Sallie McFague puts it, ‘creation is the place of salvation’, (McFague 1993:180) where each must play a daily part in the salvific work of healing one other and the environment. Melissa Raphael, writing from a Jewish feminist perspective, points out that a common theme in feminist visions of salvation is a state of ‘shalom’, inclusive of all who have experienced oppression, within humankind and within the whole natural world. (Raphael 1996b:200) Hence redemption, from this point of view, is not about escaping an alien, bodily world, but rather living an authentic, relational life in and through creation. Ruether argues that: ‘Spirit and matter, God and body, need to be

reintegrated, locating God as the source of renewal of loving, life-giving interaction in mutual relations.’ (Ruether 1998:66)

Primary in relations needing healing are those between the sexes, not least in terms of historically masculinist assumptions about redemption and gender hierarchy. In her book *Women and Redemption* (1998) Ruether traces the gender-biased nature of the understanding of redemption from the earliest Christian communities through to postmodern feminist theologies. These feminist theologies universally reject traditional ideas of women’s subordination as a function of natural inferiority, secondary status in the order of creation and punishment for priority in sin. They seek instead to vindicate women’s equality as ‘the true will of God, human nature, and Christ’s redemptive intention’.

(1998:8)<sup>1</sup>

A theology of redemption that stresses the immanent and the embodied demands that sexual difference can no longer be ignored, least of all in the priesthood. The woman priest embodies a theology of redemption that embraces both immanence and transcendence, and is interested in the biophilic, the relational and that which seeks the well-being and wholeness of all created beings. I am myself aware as a priest that my gender is a prominent factor in how people respond to me, whether in a pastoral role or at the altar rail. My embodied sexuality, my femininity, is a markedly constituent part of people’s consciousness of me as a priest, I suspect more so than if I were a man. My experience leads me to suggest that the woman priest who is aware of the symbolic significance of both sexual difference in general and the (as yet largely unexplored) feminine/female in particular can potentially harness that awareness in renewing and revitalising the symbolism attached to the divine, to the priesthood and to the Church’s understanding of itself as the Body of Christ. That awareness, from a feminist perspective, is likely to encourage and progress a shift in the Church’s understanding of redemption whereby the possibilities of the transcendent are grounded and embodied in, rather than adverse to, the immanent. The woman priest, as I have argued earlier, carries a weight of symbolic baggage associated with corporeality, earthliness and natality. As she blesses and distributes the bread at the Eucharist, she is surely an apt and forceful reminder of the earthly, immanent and urgent aspects of the nature of redemption.

I have shown that, in contrast to traditional dualistic interpretations of the feminine/female, the notion of natality, as developed by Jantzen, links all people, female and male, with the created order – ‘something to cherish, not escape from’. (Jantzen 1998b:115) The woman priest who breaks bread at the altar on behalf of the community has the potential to express in a particularly resonant way the new life that is offered with a restored relationship between humankind and God. She facilitates that birth into redemption in which worshippers partake in sharing the sacrament at the Eucharist. The emphasis on mortality and

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<sup>1</sup> Ruether sees the Quakers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as marking a key paradigm shift in the understanding of gender and redemption. The Quakers affirmed complete original equality and condemned woman’s subordination as sinful. Their theology translated to women’s participation in missionary work, preaching and ministry at meetings. (Ruether 1998:6)

escape from the mortal body evident through the history of a male-dominated Church is now counterbalanced by the presence of women priests, bringing a shift in the religious imaginary towards birth and the corporeal, nurture and the material, life in the here and now.

This is not to advocate some sort of hegemony of the female religious imaginary – indeed, as Irigaray has demonstrated, one cannot as yet envisage what such an imaginary might look like. But the woman priest, particularly one who is aware of sexual difference in relation to the religious imaginary, can begin to uncover a fuller representation of the divine and of the Church – and of the relationship between the two - than has ever been possible with a male-only clergy. The woman priest is not only a priest who represents the Church, but also a woman who represents women. So the woman priest who is aware of these issues can bring to the fore (whether in liturgical or pastoral ministry) maternal aspects of the divine and of personal identity to which others relate when in the embrace of natality as a constituent part of spirituality.

### ***Humankind And The Divine: Towards A Female Religious Imaginary And Language***

Irigaray speaks of the difficulty caused by the lack of a female divine in theological tradition, and the need, as she puts it, to

discover a language that is not a substitute for the experience of *corps-a-corps* as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body. (Irigaray 1993c:19)

I have suggested that the woman priest provides the beginnings of a religious imaginary and language that connects deeply with the maternal divine and also with corporeality in a way that was inconceivable through a male-only priesthood. In this way she helps all women to find the opportunity for self-expression in worship, a space that embraces symbolic associations with the female body, such as childbirth, female sexuality and bodily functions. Such an instance is recorded by Una Kroll. Herself a priest and mother, Kroll articulates a strong connection she feels between birth and Eucharist. When she is presiding, she writes, she has come to relate the inevitability of the coming of the Holy Spirit with the unstoppable process of giving birth. The Eucharist is, she finds, a participation in birth, articulating Jesus' necessary sacrifice as a 'bleeding to bring birth out of death', similar to the way in which women labour to bring forth new life. (Kroll 2001:118) God nurtures people towards this new life as, through grace, they hear and respond to the message of redemption.

With the transformative potential opened up by the woman priest in terms of the symbolic, there are new possibilities also for liturgy. Ross observes that

since the church's official liturgical celebrations have been so exclusive of women, women have turned to 'unofficial' religious practices, to ways of celebrating, mourning, and remembering significant events in their lives that are on no liturgical calendar. (Ross 1998: 27)

With the advent of women priests, there are now opportunities for developing language and ritual that mark and reflect the experiences of women and articulate aspects of the maternal divine. The onus here, I would argue, is on

the institution of the Anglican Church to allow and encourage such developments. My own experience has shown me that in an evangelical environment, where word takes precedence over ritual, changes to liturgy are tolerated and encouraged, whereas changes to the language used in God-talk (for instance in hymns and prayers) are suspected of straying from the divinely inspired Word of God. In an Anglo-Catholic environment, where the analogical imagination prevails, ritual tends to conform to long-standing tradition so that opportunities for alternative liturgy are circumscribed. Nevertheless, it is the case that changes have been evident both within and beyond the Anglican Communion. Cathy Milford commented shortly after the Synod's acceptance of women to the priesthood that, in relation to the new opportunity to rediscover the feminine in religion,

It is no accident that the Churches which have already accepted the priesting of women have made a dramatic move in the use of language and imagery in their liturgy. The Church Of New Zealand, the Iona Community, the United Reformed Church and the Methodist Church all bear this out. (Milford 1994:59-60)

The development of language and ritual that acknowledge the maternal divine and uphold the feminine/female does not of course necessitate having a woman's priesthood. Indeed, Ruether claims that a church liberated from patriarchy would require the dismantling of clericalism altogether. Her source-book *Women-Church*<sup>2</sup>, aimed at ushering in a new community of equals for those somewhere on the margins of the official Church, was born from her conviction that 'women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and Eucharistic famine'. (Ruether 1985:4) She proposes the formation of new communities of faith and worship, based on feminist principles, that would 'guide one through death to the old symbolic order of patriarchy to rebirth into new communities of being and living.' (1985:3) She is sceptical about the capacity of institutional churches to 'reform themselves enough to provide the vehicles of faith and worship that women need in this time.' (1985:5)<sup>3</sup> Where there are women priests, she finds that they are able to take only tiny steps toward renewing symbols and rituals. Yet she also concedes that by securing a foothold in traditional churches, feminism is able to keep in dialogue with the historic culture of parent institutions. (1985:39)

This is a role that the woman priest is particularly well-placed to play. She has by definition placed herself within the established ecclesiastical tradition and hierarchy, yet is also an outsider, unacknowledged in the religious imaginary

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<sup>2</sup> *Women-church* contains liturgies focusing on the church as a community of liberation from patriarchy; rites of healing from violence and crisis (including rape and miscarriage) life-cycle rites (including birth, puberty and cessation of fertility); and celebrations for seasons (including the monthly cycle).

<sup>3</sup> Winter, Lummis & Stokes, in *Defecting In Place*, note that many feminist spirituality groups have sprung up in the USA aiming to 'envision and model new ways of being church', as part of a 'global ecumenical movement of local feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in sacrament and solidarity'. (Winter, Lummis & Stokes 1995:152) A similar group in my own Province of Wales is Women Walking Together, loosely affiliated to the Ecumenical Forum Of European Christian Women.



and alien to the clerical culture of the institution and its practices. As a representative of women's experiences and aspirations, she may well have an interest in developing a female religious imaginary and in its expression in new forms of ritual and liturgy. Where the divine mystery is named, symbolised and expressed in terms of the feminine/female as well as the masculine/male, then new possibilities for experience of the mystery of God are disclosed. There is much scope for ritual that is transformative in its recognition of sexual difference and hence of the needs, experiences and aspirations of women. Such ritual can be challenging (even scandalous) for some yet adhere nevertheless to accepted Anglican theology.

Where a theology of priesthood pertains that allows for innovations in symbolic potential, then the woman priest who is aware of the issues I have mentioned above can help to counterbalance a patriarchal ecclesial structure that has hitherto been stubbornly blind to the feminine/female. Her calling makes her part of that process of redemption that allows all women to progress towards divine fulfilment. To borrow from Irigaray in her plea for recognition of womankind as a genre distinct from mankind, sexual difference must be applied to specific social forms, including the Church, in order for women to achieve a cultural identity. In other words, women are no longer to 'comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another' (Irigaray 1993c:64) Thus it is possible that, 'in destroying already coded forms, women rediscover their nature, their identity, and are able to find their forms, to blossom in accordance with what they are.' (Irigaray 1993b:110)

I suggest that a theology of women's priesthood that is sufficiently rich and gendered to express the symbolic possibilities of sexual difference understands the woman priest celebrating the Eucharist as taking part in a redemptive act, not least because she is claiming subjectivity for all women. It would see her as embodying the view of redemption that is understood as a movement away from injustice – for instance, from abusive relationships, from abjection, from subjugation. It would see her also as a means to begin to heal the injustice done to women by the Church itself in failing to recognise women's subjectivity and equality in the divine image. This institutional failing has been described by Sheila Durkin Dierks as 'sexism deified and presented as religious necessity...a burden of stone strapped to the backs of women'. (Dierks 1997:14) Dierks, a Roman Catholic involved in WomenEucharist, blames this sexism, expressed in excluding language and insensitive liturgy, for the exodus of many women from orthodox religion.

Part of the priestly calling is to the healing of humankind's relationship with God. Such healing must address a world which has been damaged by its lack of affirmation of sexual difference and by its repression of the feminine/female. The woman priest throws into relief the error of patriarchy in its fear and subordination of the 'other'. The historic lack of representation of the female divine in the Christian tradition is addressed by the focus of feminine symbolism within the woman priest, who has the potential to act as a step in bringing about the birth of women's subjectivity through the birth of a feminine religious imaginary. The feminine/female must hold equal value and responsibility with the masculine/male in the work of restoring humanity to the original, harmonious relationship that God intended and portrayed in scripture as the union between

Christ the bridegroom and the Church, His Bride. To this end, the woman priest offers the hope for a religious imaginary and symbolic that opens up divine horizons for all people without exception.

The faithlessness from which the bride is saved is in this case not the fecklessness and concupiscence historically ascribed to women. Rather, it is the error of patriarchy in failing to recognise the feminine/female in the divine, and the image of the divine that is present as much in women as it is in men. The woman priest signifies the recognition that this failure must be put right. She is the ultimate sign of human acknowledgement of the feminine/female in the Godhead, and of the equal value of the feminine/female in humankind.

### ***One To Another: The Woman Priest And The Call To Flourish***

I have argued that the woman priest is a powerful symbol of the need both to recognise sexual difference and to overcome oppression of one group by another. I believe that Jantzen's theology of natality becomes earthed in the woman priest who, as both an embodied sign of redemption and as a member of a marginalised group, points towards the redemptive hope for transformation in human relationships. The woman priest, though not mentioned specifically by Jantzen, has a conspicuous part to play in this new theology. In embodying natality as a human condition equally powerful as mortality, she gives expression to the call for all nats to flourish in their aspiration towards the divine.

Natality and flourishing necessarily require compassionate action. The mother's role is one that naturally involves her longing to protect and care for her children whilst allowing them to grow and to flourish into adulthood. Jesus' use of the imagery of the hen and her chicks shows the divine move to shelter people from harm and to nurture them towards their divine potential. Taking Irigaray's notion of the sensible transcendental, the woman priest represents the ability of women everywhere to mediate the divine through a celebration of their embodied and sexuate nature. From this flows the promise of flourishing to all people, through the destabilisation of the traditional male symbolic of the divine that ignores sexual difference and associates godlikeness with masculine/male attributes. The concept of flourishing, embodied in the woman priest, requires us to address the broken relationships that pertain wherever mutuality and equality have been overtaken by oppression and subjugation. Neither must we fail, where we know them to occur, to find ways of transforming such harmful relationships.

If the Church is to be the agent of the inbreaking of God's kingdom into the present world, then God-talk must include a consideration of where God may be found in the world. In other words, the Body of Christ is called to be involved not just in abstract concepts but in the embodied reality of existence, because this is where God is. Whether at international or at grassroots level, the Church is bound to be caught up in the redemptive process of justice-making as it seeks, by engaging critically and prophetically with the world, to bring in God's kingdom. The praxis of being the Church as the Body of Christ means overturning cultures that unjustly discriminate against any section of society. This may entail, for instance, questioning economic and political institutions that perpetuate an oppressively unequal distribution of land and wealth, or that

prevent reasonable access to the legal system.<sup>4</sup> Grey points out that, in acknowledging God's presence in any situation, people are bound to claim the transformative potential of that presence rather than merely accept and be reconciled with existing norms and compromises. They are bound by that divine presence to drive towards justice and to contest the 'false consciousnesses which tolerate injustice'. (Grey 1989:93)<sup>5</sup> The imperative of justice calls for an eradication of false consciousnesses within the Church itself as much as in the secular world. Hence the need to re-member the narrative, the religious symbolic and the language that will contribute towards women's full subjectivity in *imago Dei* and as citizens.

For many Christians, the stand against unjust discriminatory practices has included a challenge to powerful religious taboos practised by the Church against women, for instance with regard to entering holy places and performing ritual and leadership roles. Sometimes – perhaps where women have begun to develop a measure of self-worth – these taboos have provoked proportionately staunch reactions. Monica Furlong claims that, following the exclusion in 1897 of women even as electors from the newly formed parochial church councils, the sense of injustice was 'so strong...that church feminism was forced into being'. (Furlong 2000:91)<sup>6</sup> At this time, women were doing much hard (often unpaid) work in the mission field and in parish visiting; and the great majority of Sunday School teachers in the latter half of the nineteenth century were female. (2000:92) Yet for many, the idea of a woman being independent and highly educated was abhorrent and unbiblical. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the deaconess movement and Anglican Sisterhoods were well established;<sup>7</sup> but women were not permitted to speak in public, even to read the lesson. In 1924, for example, Maude Royden published a book entitled *The Church and Women*. (Redfern 1999:63) In it she challenged the universal subordination of women and pointed to the radical nature of Jesus' teaching and example in relation to women. Royden was a well-educated, powerful speaker and teacher. Yet she was prevented in the Anglican Church from fully exercising these gifts, forbidden by the bishop, for instance, from giving an

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<sup>4</sup> Recent practical examples include calls by the Church worldwide for debt relief for developing countries. Many parishes have supported the Make Poverty History initiative launched in 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Where Christian tradition has emphasised the transcendent, however, there has been a tendency to overlook current crises in favour of future glory. Alan Miller accordingly criticised some 'Christian environmentalism' of the 1980s as no more than 'liberally chic efforts to tidy up the global house a bit before the millennium arrives'. (Miller 1984:381)

<sup>6</sup> Women were allowed to vote and stand for election to local parochial church councils in 1914, but were not allowed into any higher layer of Church governance. In 1920, 40 of the 357 members of the new National Assembly, the governing body of the Church of England, were women. Christine McMullen attributes this more 'to the work of the Pankhursts and the women's suffrage movement than [to] enlightenment on the part of church leaders'. (McMullen 2004:7)

<sup>7</sup> Deaconess should not be confused with deacon, a ministry open to women in the Church of England only from 1987.

address in church. It was not until the 1960s that Anglican women were generally allowed to preach. (Furlong 1991:24)

It took the greater part of the last century, and much costly effort by far-sighted campaigners, for the priesthood of women finally to be recognised in the Anglican Communion. Seventy years after the publication of Royden's book, the first women priests were ordained in the Church of England, at once increasing the number of priests by 10% and providing a significant proportion of female clergy. (Thorne 2000:1)<sup>8</sup> The long road to ordination was, for many of the first female ordinands, an agonising one.<sup>9</sup> Una Kroll, for instance tells how, by the time she was eventually ordained in the Church in Wales (which accepted women in 1996, some time after the Church of England) she was 'over retirement age, could never take responsibility for a parish and could never know the delight in exercising "a cure of souls" as a shared exercise with a diocesan bishop'. (2001:102) And following her priesting she found, as have other women priests (including myself) that some members of her congregation refused to recognise her ministry.<sup>10</sup>

Despite such opposition, women priests in various Protestant denominations now serve across the globe from Japan to Namibia and Brazil. (Campbell 1996:221) Nearly half of those now training for the Anglican priesthood in England are female; and yet the priesthood of women is still by no means universally accepted. Provincial Episcopal Visitors, or 'flying bishops', minister to those parishes opposed to women's ordination. Female priests are still unable to become bishops in England (the matter is currently under debate at General Synod level) although there are female bishops in the USA, Canada, Polynesia and New Zealand.<sup>11</sup> The Church in Ireland and the Scottish

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<sup>8</sup> In 1974 eleven women were irregularly ordained in the Episcopal Church of the USA. A year later, the Anglican Church of Canada authorized female ordination, and in the 1980s other provinces started to ordain women priests. The first female priests in the Church of England were ordained in Bristol Cathedral on March 12<sup>th</sup> 1994. ([www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg3.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg3.htm), accessed 11.01.05) The problems encountered by some of the first women priests are summarised by Harriet Harris in her article 'Struggling For Truth'. (Harris 2004:80-81)

<sup>9</sup> The stories of twelve such women, ordained between 1992 and 2000, are told by Liz and Andrew Barr in *Jobs For The Boys? Women Who Became Priests*. (Barr 2001) These are stories of long campaigning, love and support, but also of prejudice and personal insult. In *Voices Of This Calling*, which chronicles the experiences of a number of women priests in the decade following the first ordinations, editor Christian Rees notes some responses to women priests, including the comment by a male Anglican priest that 'You can no more ordain a woman than you can ordain a pork pie!' (Rees 2002:20)

<sup>10</sup> Richard Greenwood, in positing a theology of mission and ministry in his book *Transforming Priesthood*, speaks of the stress caused by the ordination of women on clergy and parishes who are opposed, as well the 'fear, anger, harassment and humiliation experienced by some women in orders'. (Greenwood 1995:42)

<sup>11</sup> Penny Jamieson in New Zealand was the first woman Bishop in the Anglican Communion. Bishops in three dioceses in the USA, however, as yet refuse to ordain

Episcopal Church have voted for women bishops but have yet to appoint one. The matter is currently under discussion in the Church of Wales, and a decision is expected before the end of 2008.

In the Roman Catholic Church priesthood continues to be denied to women, and so the women's struggle for recognition has taken rather different paths. For many in the Roman Catholic tradition, simply trying to include women in the ordained priesthood as it is now exercised in the Catholic church would not be the solution to long-held discriminatory practices. Instead, writers such as Mary Hines urge for a massive transformation of the whole church structure in order to free it from patriarchal and hierarchical structures that prevent it from being a prophetic voice of liberation for all people. (Hines 1993:163) Others, whether Roman Catholic or Anglican, argue that it is important for women to be ordained even if they may subsequently question the nature of priesthood and the institution of the Church as it presently stands. (Isherwood 1996:122)

In the Anglican Church and other denominations where women are now ordained, it is possible to gauge how the woman priest contributes to the transformation of human relationships as part of the process of redemption. If redemption involves working to bring in God's kingdom, how then does the woman priest symbolise the Church's prophetic call to overcome those oppressive structures and ideologies that prevent the kingdom breaking in? Since discrimination against women has been rampant throughout church history and still thrives today, the priest who is a woman is inevitably a member of a subordinated group. She is also a member of Christ's Body, the Church, which is called to offer a prophetic voice against oppression and to seek to establish justice and mercy. The woman priest, then, has by her gender a prophetic role to play, standing both with the victims of oppression in the concrete world and also for the call to rid the world of oppression in anticipation of the coming kingdom. Her position questions those structures and attitudes in the Church and in wider society that are unjustly discriminatory. She therefore represents the outcome not only of abstractly thinking a theology of redemption for all people but of concretely doing such a theology.

The woman priest does not refute oppression directed only against women. Since the priest represents the whole Church, she then also stands against oppression of all 'others', including women, children, the underprivileged and poor and so on. She represents all those discriminated against unjustly because of age, race, class or any other distinction. As such, she stands as a beacon of hope and promise to all oppressed groups who find themselves on the wrong side of 'otherness' and who have been excluded in some way by mainstream society or culture. She is a challenge to any reigning ideology of oppression that seeks to exclude certain groups through unjust discrimination, whether in the Church or in wider society. In a theology of natality, she shows that traditional ideologies of oppression and subjugation exercised by the powerful over 'others' can be overcome.

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women priests. ([www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg3.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg3.htm), accessed 11.01.05) The issue of women becoming bishops in the Church of England and Church in Wales is currently under discussion.

## ***One to Another: Male And Female Priests Working Together***

To minister together effectively, male and female priests must respect and celebrate sexual difference in an exchange of mutual giving and receiving that mirrors the perichoretic movement of the triune God. Such an exchange reflects the eschatological community and new creation that is the ultimate fulfilment of humans as relational beings. Free of idolatrous hierarchy and subordinationism, this community provides an environment in which all individuals and groups may flourish. The symbol, to be effective, must induce a response. The Church is called to live out a principle of communion that can validly function as an icon of the trinitarian God and offer an effective working model to the whole of society. Such an orthopraxis necessarily incorporates reflection on how the priesthood of women and men together can effectively configure and carry out the life of worship and ministry in community.

Where unity in diversity is truly valued, then all members are given the freedom to achieve self-identity and to relate to one another in a way that allows them to mature to full personhood. However, the question arises as to how a priesthood of both women and men can effectively symbolise such a principle of communion within an institution where exclusionary practices remain. There is still, for instance, a 'stained-glass ceiling' within the greater part of the Anglican Church, where women remain barred from the episcopate. Professional development can be problematic even within current boundaries. Jean Cornell observes that organisational structure within the Church can work against women by failing to identify and prepare them for leadership by providing a clear career pattern that takes into account women's needs and responsibilities. (Cornell 2003:48) She reports that not every diocese has acted to encourage collaborative leadership that would prepare women for higher office. She asks: 'Should not a Church for the twenty-first century, envisioned by the kingdom, evidence mutual empowerment?' (2003:49) Penny Jamieson was the first woman in the Anglican Communion to become a diocesan Bishop. She addresses the issue of sexual difference when she remarks on her interviews with ordinands. She notes the variation in responses in relation to authority, contrasting the confident and dominating style perceived to belong to men with the more diffident and inclusive style of women. Her own experience has taught her that women ordinands often stress a vocation for service rather than seeking power. They feel the need for authorisation which ordination bestows on them. Men, by contrast, tend to assume authority without difficulty but find it harder than women to move into more mutual and relational roles. (Jamieson 2004:127)

Women have as yet to attain full subjectivity, to have an equal voice. The praxis of the Church, as well as of wider society, has not always allowed for such flourishing, especially in relation to sexual difference. Within the priesthood, as in every other form of human community, modes of being and of working together are broadly gendered. The Church, as a bastion of male-dominated, hierarchical structures and traditions, has yet to adjust fully to the influx of women priests who think and function in ways different from their male predecessors and colleagues.

Women priests are still very much a minority group within a male-oriented institution, and clearly recent acknowledgement and analysis of women's ways

of knowing and being in relation have not provoked an overnight paradigm shift in that institution's structures or behaviours. The Freudian dictum that 'women are altogether taboo' still appears to hold ground, at least in some areas of the established church, and may go some way in explaining the difficulties found by women 'invading' a hitherto all-male territory.<sup>12</sup> Monica Furlong, describing the shameful treatment by male colleagues of the first female priest at St Paul's Cathedral, and exposed to public view by a TV documentary, comments that there can be no excuse for 'an organisation which is revealed as blatantly sexist, and which, far from expressing shame at this, finds in it grounds for self-congratulation'. (Furlong 2000:360) She also refers to the problems caused in dioceses with bishops who are opposed to female priests, where there has been a 'creeping exclusion of women', and decries how readily such discrimination is defended by senior churchmen. (2000:362) Furlong argues that at parish level the issue of women priests is settled, but 'the church leadership must make up its mind.' (2000:363) She criticises not only conscious prejudice against women in leadership roles in the Anglican Church but also an anachronistic attitude that has not caught up with contemporary thinking. Despite this, she sees women priests – in parishes where they are allowed to minister – as hugely popular and 'one of the great success stories of the Church'. (2000:363) She urges those in authority to recognise this fact as it has been at grassroots level, for only then will women be fully valued and accepted.<sup>13</sup>

Furlong's hope for full acceptance of women priests within the authority structure of the Church, when viewed alongside the work of Irigaray on sexuate difference and the non-subjectivity of women, can be seen only as a long-term aspiration towards a fundamental shift in the values of our culture. The type of paradigm shift envisioned by Furlong will happen only when sexuate difference is recognised, accepted and celebrated by those in authority in the institution of the Church, so that women's way of knowing and being, although different from that of men, is not understood as less valuable or less valid. In the institutional Church especially, bound as it is to ancient traditions and practices, change in attitudes and behaviours is inevitably slow and incremental, and will be resisted as unwelcome by some members. Psychologist Chris Mawson, writing about the stress caused by unconscious processes in groups working in health care services, describes how institutional practices can be analysed and sometimes changed, but 'rarely without difficulty and resistance'. (Mawson 1994:73) He shows how those within these groups, when experiencing a threat, can become highly defensive and mistrustful, and this can lead to treating others badly. The experience by women ordinands of distrust and rejection provide a prime example of the type of behaviour described by Mawson.

Once within the system, women have the choice of either resisting the institutional culture (incurring unpopularity and causing themselves great stress)

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<sup>12</sup> Freud, Sigmund 'The Taboo Of Virginity, *The Collected Papers*' 8:75, quoted in Farley, Margaret (1990:244)

<sup>13</sup> The debate concerning leadership is currently focussed around the episcopate, as the Church of England considers the possibility of women bishops. For a collection of arguments for the case, see Harris, Harriet and Jane Shaw (2002) *The Call For Women Bishops* London: SPCK.

or conforming to it in a way that is disjunctive with their own way of being (as described, for instance, by Kathy Galloway above). Helen Thorne, in her study of the first women priests to be ordained in England, notes that, although her respondents are inclined to prefer a collaborative and facilitative style of ministry, they were 'not particularly egalitarian in their attitude to Church affairs, nor are they concerned to de-emphasise their clerical status'. (Thorne 2000:149) Having been denied positions of authority and leadership for so long, it is hardly surprising that these first women priests should fail to promote a radical critique of the established Church and deconstruct patriarchal assumptions and attitudes of those in power. Thorne found that these women were under much pressure to conform to the status quo and prove their success within the existing establishment. (2000:130) No doubt sensitive to their detractors, it was probably enough, even among those who saw the need for transformation, to prove their worth within the institution rather than directly challenge male-dominated church structures and values.

Where power and authority remain the domain of men, whom research shows have difficulty in relinquishing hierarchical, power-dominated structures, then those who believe that a more collaborative and gender-inclusive ministry is a more theologically sound way of working have an onerous task in challenging traditional cultures and theologies-in-practice and bringing about a paradigm shift in attitudes and working practices. Joanna Pentherby, a vicar serving in Wales, comments on the ongoing problems for women and men clergy working alongside each other equitably that the first cohort of women to be ordained there were tired of campaigning and glad simply to get on with ministry. 'Perhaps we did not keep account of what was happening sufficiently rigorously and have not supported the women coming after us as we should have done'. (Bayley 2006:18) I suggest that it is to the current cohort of women priests, those who followed their pioneer colleagues and have largely avoided the bruising struggle for acceptance, that the task of working towards recognition of sexuate difference belongs.

Women's priesthood, I suggest, is a catalyst that brings such a cultural transformation somewhat closer, not least because female experience and representation of the divine are brought into corporeal presence at the Eucharist. I have argued earlier that, as an embodied representative of the feminine/female, the woman priest affirms women's and men's equality in *imago Dei*, and their equal capability of representing God's presence. Whether or not she chooses or is able to adopt inclusive language in worship, the woman priest by her bodily presence highlights the need for a shift in religious imaginary to acknowledge overlooked or ignored feminine/female aspects of the divine and the divine within the feminine/female. She refutes the burden of negative historic connotations of the feminine/female that have hitherto hindered a full bodying forth of all the rich and complex meanings within the concept of the Trinity. She signifies the need to reinterpret ancient, polysemic trinitarian symbols so as to 'hear again' meanings that are true and appropriate to our time and place, and thus constitute part of the journey towards transforming traditional associations of religious symbols with adverse, asymmetrical connotations of gender.

Where gender is concerned, new symbolic modes may be opened up which are interpreted according to sexuate difference. Thinking of God in terms of neutral



or female designations as well as male ones reflects the fluidity of the divine gender; symbols are of shifting gender and so disrupt fixed gender categories, overcoming traditional bi-polar dualisms. Male and female priests together reinforce this constellation of symbolic possibilities for the triune God, and, liberated from the constrictions of an exclusively male imaginary, space is opened up for exploring a range of metaphors for the divine/human relationship and for forms of human relations. Male and female priests ministering together can help the Church to re-vision itself beyond rigid, traditional ritual and social roles towards the kind of relationships that better reflect the sacred.

The woman priest in her representative role reinforces the validity of fluid gendered designations for God who is not sexed but who is imaged by both male and female. Thus she challenges traditional metaphors for God which have been used historically to underwrite violence by men against women in patriarchal societies where cultural practices are read back to describe and interpret the nature of God. Where God and the people of God can be imagined in a range of gendered symbolic configurations, then the hierarchical notion of human gender relations, including marriage, as I explored earlier in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, is undercut. The patriarchal interpretation of women's sexuality (as with Gomer) is called into question as a social construct, and eternal, divinely prescribed male hegemony is undermined. In this context, the woman priest as a symbolic figure (as well as pastorally) may have a particular role in helping survivors of male sexual abuse to relate to a God whose hitherto dominantly male designations have been a barrier to worship and to the spiritual life.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Humankind And The Created World: The Women Priest As Symbol Of Good Stewardship***

The Church, I have argued, is called to oppose unjust and discriminatory practices that do not respect either the dignity of all people or the intrinsic value of nature. The woman priest serves an important function in this regard. Since she witnesses against a praxis of exclusion and prejudice, she has a key part to play in any challenge to the prevailing cultural ideology of domination. By her gender she is traditionally the dominated, the marginalised, the one close to earth and nature; yet as a priest she represents the divine, the kingdom to which believers aspire, the Church which is the Body and Bride of Christ. In this representative role, and particularly in presiding at the Eucharist, she is a potent signifier of the re-connection of day-to day, natural human lives with creation, through the initiator of the Eucharist, Jesus Christ.

Christine Gudorf criticises the Church's handling of the Eucharist (and all the sacraments) for separating 'Jesus' claim to be the source of life from his activities on which that claim is based'. (Gudorf 1987:297) She argues that this has happened historically both by confining the ritual to a 'clerical elite', and by excluding from that elite women, who in daily life carry out most life-nurturing tasks. (1987:297) For instance, women throughout history, according to Gudorf, have been the 'chief gatherers, preparers and servers of food'. (1987:299) Yet

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<sup>14</sup> Free Church minister Janet Wootton, in *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology Of Worship*, discusses religious ritual for survivors of sexual abuse (Wootton 2000:93).

in the context of the Eucharist, this predominantly female activity has historically been administered by men.<sup>15</sup> Limiting sacramental function to men has, then, fostered the 'separation between ordinary natural life nurtured by women, and spiritual life nurtured by a male elite who serve as symbols for all men' [sic]. (1987:297)

Gudorf writes from a Roman Catholic perspective, where her argument about women's exclusion from the priesthood remains the case. In the Anglican Church, however, where women now preside at the Eucharist, it is possible to gauge a shift in the symbolic of sacrament and priesthood. This and other sacraments are based on daily activities (giving birth, caring for the sick and dying, nurturing personal relationships) that are predominantly done by women. The inclusion of women into the priesthood bears witness that men not only now recognise the value of the traditional nurturing role of women, but that they are willing to relinquish their exclusive hold on what Gudorf calls 'ritual nurturing'(1987:302). In the Eucharist, where the bread of life is shared, it was historically only men who were able to claim the ability to nurture life. The inclusion of women priests re-makes the link between spiritual life and day-to-day life, with its struggle (for many) to put food on the table, to satisfy hunger, to stave off poverty and oppression, to survive and flourish. The woman priest re-connects the Eucharist with the ordinary activity on which it is modelled, and thus the meaning of the sacrament itself is re-membered. As Gudorf puts it: 'When women perform both sacraments and the activities that they model, the connections and the purpose of sacraments [can] gradually become clearer to all'. (1987:306)<sup>16</sup>

The woman priest is a potent signifier of the change in patterns of relationship that recognises the value both of women and of nature. The priest, in representing the Body of Christ, symbolises that duty of care which, as creatures of God, people have to each other and to the biota. In representing the feminine/female qualities of natality - fertility, nurturing, caring - that allow the world and its inhabitants to grow and flourish, she witnesses to the imperative to respect, care for and nurture the earth. In a particular way that can be true only for women, she represents both the brokenness of the world as it is, and the hope of that restoration and healing of relationship between humanity, creation and God that is the Christian hope.

The historic exclusion of women from priestly roles reinforces the importance and urgency of the symbolic function of the woman priest in re-connecting the bond between humankind and nature.<sup>17</sup> I have argued that the priest who is a

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<sup>15</sup> Gudorf goes on to list the other sacraments as naturally in the sphere of women yet in the Church made the domain of male clerics. (Gudorf 1987:299) She also notes other cultures where women are excluded from sacred activities modelled on women's tasks. (1987:299-301)

<sup>16</sup> As well as women being accorded ritual powers, Gudorf also argues that men need to be included more in the nurturing activities that sacraments model. Current gender socialisation, she believes, militates against this. (Gudorf 1987:306)

<sup>17</sup> It was not merely random accident that saw the access of women to the priesthood coincide not only with the development of feminist theologies but also with growing

woman shifts the symbolism of priesthood, and hence also the dialogue between humans and the divine, and the human response in terms of action. In destabilising an old, anachronistic symbolism she questions patriarchal notions not only about God and human identity but about the human relationship with creation. The woman priest, expressing the bodily presence of the feminine/female with all its attendant traditional notions of uncontrollable power, fear, evil and closeness to nature, is in a position to initiate and explore a new interpretation of the ancient symbols attached to the feminine/female. That closeness to nature associated with the feminine/female now calls for an urgent reappraisal of humankind's relation to creation and the prioritising of a just ethic of stewardship. As the feminine/female has traditionally been associated with bodiliness, with the earth, with nature and with sin, so the woman priest affirms the growing sense of the goodness of nature, that all people are part of creation, and that no-one, whether female or male, is 'above' nature.

In the context of the relationship between the feminine/female and nature, the woman priest surely stands as a particularly appropriate symbol for the cosmos as the embodiment of the creator God. She symbolises the dynamic of interrelatedness and mutuality between humankind and all creation. Through history, the identification of the feminine/female with nature has labelled women as inferior, less godlike, more fallen. Women have been branded as lascivious seductresses and whores who tempt men to their doom. However, a spirituality that is concerned with natality and flourishing is aware of the healing strength and wholeness that derives from a restored and rightful relationship with nature. So the woman priest stands for the responsibility shared by all people, within the redemptive task, of stewarding the natural environment. She is a reminder of the error of a dualism that understood *dominium terrae* as mastery and domination rather than compassionate stewardship.

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theological interest in the ethic of stewardship. Halkes, for instance, took the first European chair in feminist theology (1983) and developed an ecological feminist theology during a period of progressive Dutch feminism (and subsequent hierarchical hardening against democratic feminist trends). (Ruether 1998:194)

## CHAPTER 9

### NEW COVENANT, NEW CONFIDENCE – THE RECEIVED WISDOM OF CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

*‘Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the New Covenant’*

This and the following two chapters deal with the symbolic significance of blood in the Christian narrative. Here, starting with a clause from the institution narrative, I look at blood in relation to covenant and sacrifice as it has traditionally been emplotted and interpreted in the Jewish roots of Christianity and through Church history so as to provide a narrative intelligible to the faith community within its cultural context.

#### ***Covenant And Sacrifice***

Re-telling the story of the Last Supper, the institution narrative moves attention from the bread to the wine. Mark’s Gospel records that Jesus, having given thanks, instructs the disciples to drink from the cup, saying, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’ (Mark 14:24). According to Luke and Paul, Jesus speaks of the cup poured out as ‘the New Covenant in my blood’ (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). Matthew’s Gospel adds that the blood is for ‘the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt 26:28), and this phrase is incorporated into Eucharistic Prayer A. The notion of covenant used here by Jesus harks back to the covenant between God and people that is a leitmotif in the Hebrew scriptures. The etymology here is uncertain, but the term is always connected with the concept of relationship, such as a marriage or a pledge of friendship or mutual obligation, often entered into by oath or a shared meal. (Davidson 1989:324)

Israel’s covenantal relationship with Yahweh was ratified and occasionally renewed by ritual action. (McCarthy 1972:88) The recognition and commitment between Yahweh and Israel, embodied in the covenant, was crucial in keeping Israel’s worship distinct from that of other contemporary religions and cultures. (Hardy and Ford 1985:38) Old Testament scholar Ronald E Clements comments that, although the term covenant (*berit*) describes the religious order pertaining between God and Israel, the use of the term is uneven in its distribution in the Old Testament. Covenant traditions are associated with the story of Noah (Gen 9:8-17), Abraham (Gen 15:17), David (Ps 89) and Jeremiah (in the form of hope for a new covenant) (Jer 33:19-23), but is predominantly used to describe ‘the relationship between God and Israel instituted through Moses’. (Clements 1983:127) Yahweh rescues the Israelites from slavery to become a covenant community obedient to God’s law, summarised in the ten commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The commandments demonstrate that worship was intrinsic to and a priority in the concept of covenant: their establishment is followed by regulating the central act of worship, sacrifice (Ex 20).

Hebrew scripture relates how Israel owes God a debt of holiness and right living following God’s gracious commitment to the community in rescuing them from slavery. Yet over the years, Israel’s response is repeatedly marred by failure, often portrayed as adultery and hence the nation’s state of whoredom. Elijah,

after his triumph over the priests of Baal, bemoans the Israelites' forsaking of the covenant by destroying God's altars and killing prophets (1 Kings 19:10). Ezekiel prophesies that God will turn against the inhabitants of Jerusalem 'because they have acted faithlessly' (Ezek 15:6-9). However, he also foresees a New Covenant when the Lord will remove the people's hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh (Ezek 36:26). Jeremiah warns that God curses anyone who '...does not heed the words of this covenant' (Jer 11:3). He also speaks of the prospect of a New Covenant between God and the house of Israel. The old one, says God, they broke, although 'I was their husband' (Jer 31:32). The New Covenant, however, God will write on people's hearts (Jer 31:33).

This expectation was important for the early Christians, who used it to demonstrate that the new order had been established through the blood of Jesus, his death, resurrection and ascension, and was focussed liturgically on the Lord's Supper.<sup>18</sup> The author of the letter to the Hebrews writes in terms of the abrogation of the 'weak and ineffectual' earlier commandment, and the 'better hope, through which we approach God' (Heb 7:19). In Galatians, Sarah is used as an allegory to portray the covenant of promise made to Abraham as a precursor to the new one made in Jesus Christ (Gal 4:21-31). Through him, all peoples are able to enter a covenant relationship with God: through him, says Paul, we have 'obtained access to this grace in which we stand' (Rom 5:2). He is the mediator of the New Covenant that is not of the law, but of grace and truth (John 1:17). He is welcomed by John the Baptist as Bridegroom to the Church (John 3:29), the one who mediates this New Covenant that promises an eternal inheritance. This New Covenant no longer relates to particular, binding contracts which fallen humans can never fully keep, but is renewable, through the grace given at the Eucharist, in full acceptance of human sinfulness and God's forgiveness.

The premise of a covenant between humankind and a divine being is closely associated with sacrifice, a custom widely practised throughout the history of religion. Indeed, Gregory Dix maintains that sacrifice is 'as wide as worshipping humanity, a rite of natural as well as revealed religion'.<sup>19</sup> (Dix 1945/82:746) Sacrifice is an important feature of the Hebrew scriptures and was a focal part of religious ritual in the Temple until its destruction. Animal sacrifices, where blood was central to the rite, included holocausts (burnt offerings of the whole animal), guilt offerings that were part burnt and part left for the priest, and peace offerings where again only part of the animal was burnt. Leviticus in particular details how, when and why sacrifices should be carried out. Expiatory sacrifices, for example, were made for purification after child-birth and other legal uncleannesses (Lev 12:6, 15:14, 29). Expiatory sin-offerings (Lev 4-7) became prominent in the post-Exilic period, when a sense developed of God's judgement on the nation's disobedience. The aim was the maintenance of cultic and moral

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<sup>18</sup> The New Covenant in Christ's blood appears in Mark 14:24, Matt 26:28, Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25.

<sup>19</sup> Sir James Frazer offers examples and discussion on sacrifice in a range of religions and cultures in his seminal work *The Golden Bough*, 1890-1915 (Frazer abridgement 1922/1993/1996).

purity, brought about by the removal of impurities through sacrificial blood. Sin-offerings were seen as a God-given means of wiping away iniquities that prevented the community from fulfilling the obligations of the covenant relationship. (Young 1975:28) A peace offering was made as a sacrifice of thanks and praise, and was followed by the offerer eating what was left of the sacrifice at a common meal with friends, the priests having consumed the breast and shoulder (Lev 10:14). Human sacrifice, practised by other contemporary religions, was abhorred (Lev 20:1-5).<sup>20</sup> Animals selected for sacrifice had to be from the domestic stock of the sacrificer (Lev 22:17-19), and excluded unclean creatures such as dogs and pigs, and usually also those with any defect (Lev 22:20). The central element of the sacrifice was the oblation of blood on the altar by the priest (Lev 1:5, 3:2, 4:5). The sprinkling of blood on the altar is thus associated with the notion of propitiation by virtue of the God-given life contained within it. The blood was never to be consumed but, since it gave life to the body, was to be offered for the atonement of the soul (Lev 7:10).

### ***Sacrifice And The New Covenant***

The concept of atonement is one which has continued from its Jewish ancestry through the life of the Christian Church. The doctrine has been subject to a range of interpretations at various periods, each reflecting contemporary cultural assumptions and interests.<sup>21</sup> FW Dillistone remarks that any meaningful interpretation carries something of a sense of 'brokenness, of disruption, of things being out of joint, of falling short, of estrangement from the ideal self, from social well-being, from God'; and all of them express something about the 'once for all self-offering of the Christ on the cross'. (Dillistone 2002:53)

The first Christians, in the context of a culture where religion without sacrifice was inconceivable, were thought of as atheists because they refused to offer sacrifices. (Young 2002:515) The Old Covenant, with its custom of animal sacrifice, was succeeded by Christ's New Covenant brought in by his saving action on the cross. The Early Church repudiated the offering of material sacrifices, seeing Christ's death as the supreme sacrifice; yet its religious language and ritual was rich in sacrificial imagery: worship was thought of as offering spiritual sacrifices, not least because, as Frances Young points out, 'sacrifice was the only way of worship known'. (Young 1975:10)

Young comments that the earliest understanding of the offertory in the Eucharist was as a sacrifice of thank-offering: 'it was the natural view of the Christian's self-oblation in worship and service'. (2002:518) Paul writes: 'our paschal lamb,

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<sup>20</sup> Frazer notes that among the Semites of western Asia, at a time of national crisis, the king would sometimes sacrifice his own son for the people. (Frazer 1922/93/96:293)

<sup>21</sup> Michael Winter, in his book *The Atonement* (1995), explores how humankind was reconciled to God through the atonement. He looks at a range of historical arguments, from the Fathers through to twentieth century authors such as TF Torrance and von Balthasar, which seek to account for 'an otherwise pointlessly cruel death'. (Winter 1995:37) Winter does not engage with feminist thinkers. Lucy Tatman offers a brief feminist critique in Isherwood, Lisa & Dorothea McEwan, eds. *An A To Z Of Feminist Theology* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press pp.10-12.

Christ, has been sacrificed', (1 Cor 4:7b) and he speaks of Christ as one who 'gave himself up for us, as fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (2 Cor 5:2). The Epistle to the Hebrews expresses the notion that the whole sacrificial law of the Old Testament is fulfilled and superseded by the sacrifice of Christ. The author, referring to Christ removing sin by sacrificing himself, reflects the traditional belief in the expiatory nature of blood sacrifice, 'for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' (Heb 9:22, 26). The once-for-all nature of Christ's atoning act is here contrasted with that of the Jewish high priest which required constant repetition. Through Christ's death the New Covenant was made, and the sins of the faithful who entered into this new relationship will not be remembered (Heb 8:12). The notion of a day of judgement of sins, and the traditional Day of Atonement, when the priest would make atonement for all the people (Lev 16:33), were brought to fulfilment in and through the death of Christ. The sacrificial death of Christ enabled liberation from evil and restoration of humankind's relationship with the divine. The renewal of Christ's New Covenant of grace became focussed in the Eucharist, the central rite of memorial, remembrance, covenant, sacrifice and transformation.

The question as to whether this rite is actually a sacrifice has been a matter of heated debate, culminating in the Reformation. Frank Senn, in his history of Christian liturgy, notes that: 'Reformers and papalists in the sixteenth century hurled more searing invective at one another concerning the sacrifice of the mass than concerning the doctrine of transubstantiation'. (Senn 1997:655) Nancy Jay, writing from the perspective of a sociology of religion, observes that the Protestant reformers 'agreed with one another on nothing about Eucharistic theology except to deny that the Eucharist was an actual sacrifice'. (Jay 1992:113-4) In the Reformed Church any sacerdotal implications and expressions relating to sacrifice were expunged from the liturgy for the ordering of priests and from the communion service. Article 31 repudiated the sacrifice of the mass as a blasphemy and a fable. (Beckwith 1964:23) The issue of the sacramental presence of the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist remains one of debate among Anglicans, between the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, and among other denominations. The Eucharist is seen variously as a sacrifice, although not separate or additional to that of Christ on the cross (the view of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and High Anglican churches); and as a holy memorial meal, Christ's sacrifice on the cross having done away with any further need for sacrifice (the view of many Protestants, whose emphasis is on the Eucharist as a sacrifice of worship, praise, thanksgiving and self-offering). Both positions can embrace the notion of individual and communal sacrificial response in terms of self-giving. Christopher Cocksworth, for instance, emphasises the response of service evoked at the Eucharist. We can enter such a response through Christ's own self-giving, and rejoice 'that we participate in Christ's eternal life of obedient self-offering in praise and prayer to the Father'. (1991:64)

Kenneth Stevenson notes that the recent process of revision by many denominations of the eucharistic rite has made clear how much is shared in common. The Roman Catholic Church has recovered a sense of thanksgiving and memorial as well as sacrifice, whilst Protestants have found that 'sacrifice is not a dirty word and that its early use was about celebrating the memorial of the

passion and the work of the cross in us now'. (Stevenson 2005:132) Renewed interest in the Jewish origins of the rite have illuminated thanksgiving and supplication as the fundamental features of the Eucharistic Prayer: thanks for the events and truths of the Christian faith and intercession for the wellbeing and work of the Church now. (2005:132)

The debates about the precise nature of atonement and of the meaning and relevance of sacrifice in relation to the Eucharist are not my main concern here. I mention them briefly only to demonstrate what cannot be contested: that language and imagery around the idea of sacrifice, including the shedding of blood, have always been part and parcel of the Christian narrative, particularly in relation to atonement. Even in low-church Anglicanism, the notion of sacrifice is present in the narrative of the crucifixion and in the offering of worship and service. As Young puts it, 'no treatment of the death of Christ escapes from using words and phrases which originated in the practice of sacrificing animals'. (Young 1975:10) Sacrifice, albeit the subject of various interpretations by the Church, is ingrained within our religious imaginary, and inseparable from the religious imaginary of the Christian narrative.



## CHAPTER 10

### NEW COVENANT, NEW CONFIDENCE – SOME FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

*'Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the New Covenant'*

Symbolism around blood and sacrifice has always been embedded within the Christian narrative, and as such it has been bounded by received paradigms that have influenced the processes of continuing emplotment and interpretation. I now examine some feminist analyses of the significance of blood, particularly in relation to the historically assumed association of women with sinfulness and impurity. I show how the concrete, lived experience of women, when acknowledged, can refigure the narrative so that it can become integrated with a revisioned understanding of women's identity, self-understanding and status in *imago Dei*.

#### ***Men, Women And Blood***

The ancient connection between life, blood and sacrifice which I explored in the previous chapter may now be largely lost to the postmodern imagination. However, blood still carries a powerful charge and, as John Moses comments, it 'has been intimately associated in men's minds with the symbolism of sacrifice'. (Moses 1992:81) It is telling that Moses uses non-inclusive language here: is he using the male pronoun to signify humankind in general, or to refer to the male gender in particular? He does not specify, but the question points up the fact that the notion of sacrifice and the accompanying shedding of blood in the Christian narrative (as well as that of other religions) is largely related to the masculine imagination and practices carried out by men. The Old Testament tells of blood sacrifices performed by men (Abraham, Moses, Elijah) usually using male animals. Christ the male saviour sheds his blood for our salvation. Those who consecrate the elements at the altar are overwhelmingly (in some denominations exclusively) men. In secular stories, too, it is usually male blood, often connected with the potency of its shedding in largely masculine activities, that is normative: that of tragic young soldiers immortalised by war poets such as Wilfred Owen, for example:

Happy are men who yet before they are killed  
Can let their veins run cold.<sup>1</sup>

When men bleed, it is usually associated with violence: a wounding through combat, an accident, an assault, a self-sacrifice. There is often a link with heroism or bravery.<sup>2</sup> The knight slays the evil dragon; the priest of ancient times offers a sacrifice for a battle won; young lads (at least before HIV/AIDS) seal their brotherhood with their own blood; folk leaders fight for their people's

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<sup>1</sup> Owen, Wilfred 'Insensibility', in Allott, Kenneth (1962) *The Penguin Book Of Contemporary Verse* Penguin 1962 p.120.

<sup>2</sup> The death in May 2006 of the first British female soldier serving in Iraq re-ignited debate in the media about the propriety of women serving on the front line in areas of conflict.

freedom (the character portrayed by Mel Gibson in the film 'Braveheart', or the dashing soldier and lover of Louis de Bernieres' novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, on the 'wrong' side yet representative of decency and gallantry). As Tina Beattie points out, 'For a man, the sight of his own blood must always be associated with trauma and violence'. (1996:489) In normal, everyday life, men do not come into contact with their own or another's blood. When they do, it usually accompanies heightened emotion or awareness: the shock of injury, the awe of the eucharistic sacrifice, the exhilaration of the sports field, the fear and excitement of watching childbirth.

Women's experience of blood is rather different. Female blood is intimately connected with the daily round, the monthly cycle, rhythms of birth and death, fecundity, fertility, labour and rest, emotional changes, periods of reflection and creativity. The onset of blood can trigger celebration, hope, relief, despair. Blood is central to the healthy life of normally functioning young women. Blood signals the beginning of adulthood, the pleasure or disappointment of the empty womb; its cessation indicates the start of another's life or the ending of one chapter and the beginning of a new phase. Given the importance of blood in the lives of women, and their intimate connection with natural bloodshed, it seems reasonable to ask why, throughout Judeo-Christian history, religious rites associated with blood have been performed almost exclusively by men. Moreover, women's natural bloodshedding has hardly figured in the discourses of society – the arts, literature and so on - except as a medical 'problem', investigated by gynaecologists and addressed occasionally by women's magazines and (in recent years) alternative comedians. Rather, women's blood has historically been portrayed in art and literature invariably in association with violence done to them, often in the form of murder or rape or another form of sexual abuse. The Hebrew scriptures feature a number of such instances, including the offering by Lot of his daughters to the men of Sodom for their sexual satisfaction (Gen 19); the rape of Diana (Gen 34:2); the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19); and the sacrifice by Jephtha of his daughter (Judges 11).

Female Christian saints are often remembered because of their resistance as virgins to sexual abuse, forced marriage and other forms of violence perpetrated upon them. The story of Saint Winifred, for example, is of a seventh-century Welsh girl who is the victim of attempted rape by a prince. Fleeing towards a church, the prince catches her and cuts off her head. A monk replaces Winifred's head, prays over her and she is restored to life. She becomes a nun and eventually abbess at Gwytherin. Where her head fell, at Holywell, legend says that a spring of healing water broke forth. The well has ever since been a place of pilgrimage and healing.<sup>3</sup> A much more recent example is that of Manche Masemola, born in the Transvaal just before the First World War. She began to attend Christian classes, and her parents, fearful that she might refuse to marry, tried to discourage her with beatings. They finally killed her. Her burial place became a site of pilgrimage, and in 1975 her name was added to the

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<sup>3</sup> An account of the saint's life and of the shrine can be found at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/liskmj/living-spring/sourcearchive/ns1/ns1tgh2.htm>. The shrine is open to the public and the well remains a popular destination for pilgrims seeking healing.

calendar of the Province of South Africa. Her statue now stands with those of nine other martyrs on the west front of Westminster Abbey. (Chalker 1999:5)

In the secular arena, author Michael Frayn predicts that a moderate collection of classical fine art today would probably contain

Lucretia being raped by Tarquin, and Europa by the bull; Prosperine being carried off by Pluto, and the Sabine women by the Romans; various gang rapes of nymphs by assorted gods and centaurs; and a number of last-minute rescues.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Purity And Defilement***

The distinct difference in treatment between the bloodshed of men and that of women can be interpreted from the viewpoint of purity systems that evolved over long periods of time in order to safeguard a community from defilement. Avoidance of defilement is a recurring theme in religion and, as Ricoeur has shown, 'Dread of the impure and rites of purification are in the background of all our feeling and all our behaviour relating to fault.' (Ricoeur 1967:25) Since purity systems often relate to bodily orifices, their regulations usually concern food, waste products, bloodshed (including menstruation), sexual emissions, sexual acts, birth and death. William Countryman, in his study of sexuality in the context of biblical purity codes and property rights, states that purity as the avoidance of dirt is a strong theme in the biblical treatment of morality; and in the ethic of purity, dirtiness can be defined as 'wrong and therefore to be avoided, corrected and/or punished'. (Countryman 1998:147)

In Jewish culture and elsewhere, taboos, laws and customs developed over several centuries as a means by which, through the mediation of the priests, society could become conformed to the sovereign will of God. The association of cleanness with obedience to God's will is evidenced, for instance, when Ezekiel prophesies that there will be a New Covenant between God and his people: 'you shall be clean from all your uncleanness' (Ezek 36:25). The concern to safeguard a consecrated community, founded on justice and holiness, and to separate it from the defilements of the surrounding pagan world, is reflected in customs and taboos pertaining to personal hygiene and health. The notion of taboo denotes a sacred prohibition making certain people or things untouchable or unmentionable. Ricoeur defines the term as a 'condition of objects, actions, or persons that are "isolated" or "forbidden" because of the danger involved in contact with them'. (Ricoeur 1967:12) Taboos around childbirth and menstruation signify something sacred (with generative, life-giving power) but also unpredictable and mysterious (with good and/or bad associations, which must be kept in check) and to be avoided and kept apart (the dirty and polluting). Researchers have found that many communities worldwide developed a range of taboos and practices that fell somewhere along this continuum.<sup>5</sup> In patriarchal society, where maleness is normative, cultural purity systems that define cleanness and dirtiness tend to regard men as more

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<sup>4</sup> Frayn, Michael (1999) *Headlong* p.100.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Raphael, M *Theology and Embodiment* (p.284); Furlong, M *Dangerous Delight: Women and Power in the Church* (SPCK 1991 p.31); Shuttle, P & P Redgrove *The Wise Wound* (Marion Boyars 1999 p.63).

closely reflecting and representing the divine, whilst women are seen as less complete, less holy.

Israel evolved a highly developed purity system, aimed at avoiding sin by regulating definitions of 'clean' and 'dirty', and avoiding anything considered contaminating. As a strongly patriarchal community jealous of its particular identity, it abhorred the religious practices of its neighbours, and its purity system testified, in the view of Julia Kristeva, to 'the harsh combat Judaism, in order to constitute itself, must wage against paganism and its maternal cults'. (Kristeva 1982:94) She finds that Israel's purity regulations were pervaded by the concept of defilement. (1982:90) Ricoeur underlines the link in Israel's history between defilement and sin, commenting that, even with increasing influences between Greek and other cultures, '...the Greeks never attained the feeling of sin in its peculiar quality and with the intensity of which only the people of Israel supply an example'. (Ricoeur 1967:34) Women's blood was of particular concern since, as Jewish Reform theologian Rachel Adler explains, 'it made women uniquely capable of causing men to sin by transmitting pollution to them'. (Adler 1993:39)

Childbirth, for example, was subject to purity codes. Leviticus 12 gives regulations for a woman's postpartem uncleanness. For a son, the mother remains unclean for seven days, the same period as for menstruation. Then, following the boy's circumcision, she must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding, during which time she must not touch or approach anything holy. For a daughter, the period is two weeks and sixty-six days respectively.<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 15 gives regulations for discharges causing uncleanness, including the menses (Lev 15:19-30). Jewish feminist theologian Melissa Raphael, commenting on the abhorrence of menstrual blood as profane, remarks: 'There seems little doubt that the biblical traditions have and continue to find menstrual blood repellent to the holy,' (Raphael 1996a:171) a repellence linked to associations with putrefaction, dirt and death. Levitical rules indicate that not only is the menstruant ritually unclean, but that anyone who comes into contact with her, including her husband, is also unclean. Sexual intercourse is banned at this time as an unlawful sexual relation, alongside bestiality and incest (Lev 18:19). The punishment for transgressors of this regulation is to be 'cut off from their people' (Lev 20:18). Return to normal life after the menses follows the sacrifice of a sin offering and a burnt offering.

Any flow of blood outside the usual period of menstruation also marks a woman as unclean; her natural bloodshed puts her into a state of ritual defilement. Jonah Steinberg (Rabbinical School of Hebrew College) notes that vaginal bleeding prevented women, along with 'lepers, ejaculants, and carriers of corpse impurity...from entering the sacred precinct of the Temple'. (Steinberg 1997:8) Exclusion from certain cultic and religious practices reflected their subordinate legal status. For example, as Judith Romney Wegner explains in her work on

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Noth suggests that the longer period of purification for the mother following the birth of a daughter indicates the cultic inferiority of the female sex. (*Leviticus*, SCM Press 1965 p.97)

the status of women in the Mishnah,<sup>7</sup> a woman could not offer the paschal lamb in her own right; it had to be slaughtered by the (male) head of the household. (Wegner 1988:148) A synagogue could be constituted only by the presence of at least ten males; women were not counted, and did not receive instruction in the Law, although they did play more formal and important roles in synagogue life during the Diaspora. (Banks 1994:125) The Mishnah's framers regarded women either as chattels, the property of men, or as persons with their own rights and duties, depending on context, and invariably in relationship to men.

In the Jewish purity system, laws pertaining to the menstruating woman were called *hilkhot niddah*, the latter word connoting abhorrence and repulsion. (Adler 1993:40) Adler, in critiquing traditional notions of purity, comments:

The icon for sinful Israel wallowing in its corruption is not the corpse-handler or the leper but the exposed *niddah*, her skirts stained with menstrual blood, shunned by passersby.<sup>8</sup> (1993:40)

Ezekiel's description of Israel's conduct as a nation compared it to 'a woman's monthly uncleanness in [God's] sight' (Ezek 36:17). Talmudic discussions responded to menstruation with fear and disgust, and linked it with a general pernicious influence by the menstruant on the environment: turning wine to vinegar, for instance, or begetting degenerate children. Even her breath and speech cause impurity in others. (Steinberg 1997:12) Steinberg observes that rabbis through late antiquity and medieval times invoked notions of danger and disgust to urge compliance of the *hilkhot niddah*.<sup>9</sup> Men were encouraged to respond with fear and revulsion to the menstruating woman.<sup>10</sup> He argues that by attributing to the menstruant a physically and spiritually corrupting odium, and by normalising and privileging a reaction of disgust, an impact is made on perceived and experienced female identity and gender relations 'along the ritualized and mythologized boundary of sex'. (1997:24) The regulations of *hilkhot niddah* developed within an interpretive context typified by an assumption of an 'unwholesome, even corrupt or pernicious nature inherent in menstruation and, by extension, in womanhood itself'. (1997:25)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mishnah, from the Hebrew root 'to repeat', refers to teaching transmitted orally and committed to memory.

<sup>8</sup> Lam 1:8, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Women continued to observe the laws of *niddah* after the destruction of the Temple, despite that fact that the demand for ritual purity governing men's entry into the tabernacle precincts (including being separated from a menstruating woman) no longer pertained. Without the Temple, rituals such as sacrifice and *mikveh* (ritual immersion) were technically not required. Sybil Sheridan argues that women continued the tradition for reasons of personal space and control of sexual activity. (Sheridan 1996:242-3)

<sup>10</sup> Steinberg contrasts earlier rabbinic teaching with current texts on *niddah* laws, which tend to focus on 'family values', marital vitality and mutual respect. However, he questions whether the new language is 'sufficient to displace erstwhile prejudices and to chart a course ahead.' (Steinberg 1997:8)

<sup>11</sup> A view of *niddah* from the perspective of a practising Orthodox Jewish woman is given by Blu Greenberg, 'In Defense Of The "Daughters Of Israel"', in Soskice & Lipton (2003) pp.229-243. Greenberg defends the practice as generating 'a different

This assumed unwholesomeness is evident, for instance, in Job. Referring to a mortal born of woman, he asks: 'Who can bring what is pure from the impure?' (Job 14:4). The implication is that the womb is an unclean place whose menstrual and human issue must be subject to the regulations of a purity system. The notion of the generally defiling effect of women occurs in Exodus 19:10-15 where, to achieve an adequate consecration at Mount Sinai, those listening to Moses are told not to go near a woman. The command, obviously addressed to men, essentially defines women as 'other' and non-normative. (Some recent translations, such as the Living Connections Good News Bible, are more inclusive and allude to 'sexual relations').<sup>12</sup> Countryman suggests that, in the Torah, 'women appear to be a more virulent source of the contagion of impurity than men'. (Countryman 1998:29) He argues that texts concerning harlots and divorced, defiled or foreign women (e.g. Lev 21:7, 14, Deut 24:1-4) indicate a '...general anxiety about the polluting potential of women', especially during menstruation and around childbirth. (1998:30) The 'normal' state of a woman, Countryman suggests, is non-menstrual, 'especially...where the ideal woman married at puberty and, from then on, remained more or less continually either pregnant or nursing until menopause'. (1998:26)

His supposition raises the question as to who is considered a 'normal' woman, and why the natural processes of menstruation and childbirth should be viewed as 'abnormal'. As Raphael points out, a modern woman's natural bodily functions, according to the strict purity codes of Judaism, would put her in a ritually unclean and impure state for about 150 days every year from puberty to menopause. (Raphael 1996a:172) Women today would by this measure be defined as 'abnormal' for about 40% of their biologically productive lives. Anthropologist Mary Douglas explains the rationale of these and other purity regulations as the concern to aspire to wholeness and completeness as a reflection of the holiness of God and the perfection of Creation. (Douglas 1966:41-57) The ideal of the wholesome person or animal was represented by the complete male, unblemished by disease, contamination or injury. The wholesome female was an extension of the male ideal, but would not have included a menstruant, who was by definition unclean.

### ***Women's Bloodshed: The Sacred And The Taboo***

The constraints and restrictions applied by Jewish and other purity systems to women's bloodshed have been attributed to a deep-seated fear of female powers evident and ingrained in virtually every patriarchal culture. Many writers from a range of disciplines have, over the last generation, analysed this phenomenon. Edward Shorter, writing from the viewpoint of social history, suggests that women's blood is a sign of the generative power which women possess and which men have feared: 'Of all male fears of women, most wrenching was the fear of the uterus'. (Shorter 1982:286) He finds that male phobias about the menses are 'as old as time and known in virtually every

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sense of self for a woman, a feeling of autonomy', building character as a Jewish woman and restoring an 'element of holiness to our bodies, our selves'. (p.242)

<sup>12</sup> Modern translations of scripture may be more helpful for devotional purposes, but it may reasonably be asked whether the use of inclusive language fails to faithfully acknowledge the androcentrism integral to a previous age and culture.

society on record'. (1982:287) Rupert Davies, in observing gender inequalities in the Anglican Church, comments on deeply-rooted notions about the evil of sexuality, and on the atavistic dread of the dark mystery of womanhood, threatening to overwhelm and take over Church and society. (Davies 1984 chap. 3)

From a feminist standpoint, theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that: 'Patriarchal religion is built on many millennia of repressed fear of the power of female processes'; (Ruether 1990b:18) whilst Kristeva links patriarchy with fear of the pre-oedipal archaic mother (a source for mediating the symbolic) and her generative power. Indeed, she argues that the taboo of the mother appears to be the 'originating mytheme' in the project of separation of the speaking subject from the mother. It is the power of the maternal relationship - a dreaded one, associated with life and death, with lunar cycles, with the mysterious and unpredictable - that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing. (Kristeva 1982:77) Raphael, addressing directly the issue of menstrual blood, argues that it can be seen as a defiling negative force because it represents death: 'female supernatural energies will not, that month, have been exhausted by providing the community with a child'. (Raphael 1996:147) She links the 'myth of feminine evil' with a perceived connection between 'menstruality and material, moral and mental instability'. (1996:190) The menstrual woman is associated with mysterious forces for both good and evil, beyond the control of men, resonating with unpredictability and chaos – elements feared in patriarchal society, which seeks to order and control. Impurity denotes otherness, the loss of distinction, and woman is quintessentially other. Identity is preserved through avoidance of the pollution of the other. Beattie observes that: 'Man knows who he is by knowing who he is not – he is not woman'. (Beattie 2003:121) He is drawn to the maternal body but to develop identity he sees that he must transcend such vulnerabilities. This, Beattie argues, 'is the haunted psyche of oppositions and struggles – identity or otherness, spirit or flesh, control of desires – that Christianity has allowed to flourish within its symbolic and social worlds'. (2003:121)

The male struggle for identity goes some way to explain the ambivalent mixture of the sacred and the taboo that surrounds menstrual customs. Women's blood – evidence of the fecundity, mystery and power of women themselves – carries a heavy positive and negative charge which always, in patriarchal society, must be kept in check. So, as Raphael maintains, there must be:

a limit, a boundary, a border between the sexes, a separation between feminine and masculine as foundation for the organisation that is 'clean and proper'...subject to law and morality. (Raphael 1996:100)

It is these efforts to keep society 'clean and proper' that have led to measures to control and restrict the power of females, particularly fertile women, and contact between the sexes. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, for example, in his *Historia Naturalis*, reports on the virulent effects of the menstrual flow. Irremediable evils result from menstruation coinciding with an eclipse of the moon or the sun; moreover, the touch of a woman is said to ruin vines, ivy and

ruel.<sup>13</sup> These were the views current in the Roman world at the time of Jesus of Nazareth. I have already noted the view held by Schussler Fiorenza and others of the radical and counter-cultural inclusiveness of the community centred on Jesus, including the many women who played key roles in witness and mission. This community of equals provided a model for challenging and transforming contemporary hierarchical structures of society, and included a level of inclusivity towards women that was shocking even to those close to him. His was what Schussler Fiorenza calls 'a socially and religiously deviant group', that contrasted with many contemporary cultural and religious values. (Fiorenza 2003:207) His challenge to traditional purity codes included those relating to corpses, to disease and to women.

The pericope concerning the haemorrhaging woman illustrates his affirmation of women excluded by society for reasons of ritual impurity.<sup>14</sup> It is a story which, according to Janet Soskice, has been 'curiously under-discussed' as a starting point for exploring the symbolism in the New Testament of defiling female blood. (Soskice 1994a:13) According to Mark, the woman has spent a fortune on consultations with doctors, all to no avail. In all three accounts she approaches Jesus from behind, so that he does not see her. Mark's version explains that she has heard about Jesus; both Matthew and Mark have her reasoning that, if she can only touch Jesus' cloak, she believes she will be healed. Immediately she does this, according to Luke, her haemorrhaging stops and, Mark adds, she knows herself to be cured. Jesus turns round, aware, as Mark and Matthew put it, that power has gone out from him. He asks the crowd who has touched his clothes, and in Mark and Luke his disciples wonder how he can pose such a question when the crowd is crushing around them. But Jesus persists, and the woman comes forward, according to Mark and Matthew in great trepidation. Having listened to her explanation, and addressing her as Daughter, Jesus tells her that her faith has healed her, and to go in peace. It is at this moment, according to Matthew, that she recovers.

There has been some discussion about whether the woman in this pericope was actually suffering from chronic vaginal bleeding, and therefore whether her encounter with Jesus can be read in the light of Leviticus 15 and the taboos associated with menstruants.<sup>15</sup> However, it might be argued that her trembling, described by Mark and Luke, is as much to do with her fear of the wrath of those around her in breaking purity codes (especially in the presence of Jairus, leader of the synagogue) as of her awe in the presence of a great healer. If this is the case, she would be especially fearful of rendering a respected healer ritually unclean. Yet the woman has faith that, as MD Hooker's commentary on St Mark's Gospel puts it, Jesus' 'power is greater than the contaminating force of [her] impurity'. (Hooker 1991:149) As both a woman and as a menstruant, she has been disbarred from many religious customs and practices, especially those

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<sup>13</sup> Pliny The Elder *The Natural History*, Bostock, John and HT Riley, eds (1855) Book XXVIII:23 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Plin.+Nat.+toc> (accessed 09.09.06)

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 9, 18-22; Mark 5, 21-34; and Luke 8, 40-48.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Jackson, G. *Jesus As First-century Feminist: Christian Anti-Judaism?* In *Feminist Theology* no:19, Sept 1998 (p.85).



associated with holy objects and sacrifice. The woman, aware that she is breaking strict purity codes by appearing in public and touching Jesus (thus causing him also to be ritually unclean), nevertheless seeks healing from him and tells him her story. Jesus' response - calling her 'Daughter' – upholds her faith and trust in him, and vindicates her actions as praiseworthy rather than socially improper. He makes no mention in this case of any past sin, and his engagement with her goes far beyond a simple act of charity or pity. By simply talking with her – perhaps especially in the presence of Jairus – Jesus signals the overturn of these religious constraints in an inclusive invitation to all to approach the holy, including those regarded as disabled or in some way 'other'. Jesus' public dialogue with her stresses that he is bringing her back into the society that has rejected her. He gives her back her self-respect and spiritual and mental peace as well as a simple cure.

His final command to go in peace uses the Hebrew word 'Shalom' which, according to Christopher Mann's commentary on the Gospel, 'carries the meaning of wholeness, soundness, rather than the sense of an absence of strife implied by the English translation'. (Mann 1986:286) Soskice notes that this sense of 'peace', restored to the woman, comes also with renewed fertility and wholeness. This too is a feature of the story surrounding that of the haemorrhaging woman and Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter whom Jesus restores to life and hence to potential fertility in her future womanly life. Hence the two linked stories, Soskice argues, 'have elements of defilement and "death", and of fecundity and new life'. (Soskice 1994a:15) Soskice also relates the idea of 'peace' here in the stories of Jairus' daughter and the haemorrhaging woman to the ushering in of a new creation. This new creation is marked by Jesus' power over illness, infertility and death, as dealt with in these overlapping narratives.<sup>16</sup> In both stories, Soskice maintains, Jesus appears to take part in the creative power of God. With the restoration of peace the woman experiences through Jesus more than an absence of physical affliction; it is also acceptance, respect and restoration of self-esteem and dignity. Jesus transforms her from the impure, shamed outsider to the accepted, healed and embraced member of the new community of love. He restores women's dignity and value and dismisses any bar to inclusion due to nature and physiology. The message is that women are not to be denied access to the holy simply as a consequence of physiological function.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Soskice also links the restoration of peace illustrated here with Jesus' stilling of the storm (Matt 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25).

<sup>17</sup> Katharina von Kellenbach cautions against a simplistic feminist interpretation that Jesus in this (and other) stories shows himself to be a 'feminist'. She acknowledges that Jesus displayed a liberal attitude towards women, but questions the reconstruction that 'he *deliberately* and *intentionally* transgressed existing misogynist law'. (von Kellenbach 1996:238) Texts used to illustrate Jewish anti-feminist teachings, she points out, are often those rules and regulations recorded by rabbis in the Mishnah and Talmud, written many years after the time of Jesus.

## ***Menstruation And Misogyny***

We have seen, however, that within a comparatively short time the radically inclusive nature of Christ's ministry and teaching regarding women had been largely subsumed in the Church's reversion to a patriarchal worldview. His affirmation of the full personhood, status and potential of women in *imago Dei* remained largely ignored, disputed or denied through the greater part of Church history. Evidence of the detestation evoked by menstruation is found in the third century *Didascalia*, which instructed that women were not unclean during their period and did not need ritual ablutions, a teaching reaffirmed by Pope Gregory 1 in AD 601. (Beattie 1996:2) The fact that such teaching is recorded indicates that opposite views were promulgated.

Despite these teachings, taboos around menstruation were re-established in at least some sections of the Early Church. There was discussion in the third century church as to whether menstruating women should receive Holy Communion. (von Kellenbach 1994:4) Bishop Dionysius forbade women to enter church at this time. (von Kellenbach 1994:112)<sup>18</sup> Durham Cathedral (founded in 1093) features a Lady Chapel, so named since it was once the only part of the cathedral that could be entered by women according to the rules of the Benedictine order of monks. A little way inside the main cathedral building is a black line in the floor which marked the point beyond which women were not allowed to pass.<sup>19</sup> The tenth-century Abbot Odo of Cluny taught that to embrace a woman was to embrace a sack of manure. Men in orders were discouraged from associating with women. Purification after childbirth became the norm. (Ruether 1990:15) The result, as Ruether observes, was that women came to view themselves as 'debilitated and polluted...because of their bleeding'. (1990:11)

Concomitant with the male abhorrence of menstruation was an increasing restriction on women's liberty, authority and leadership roles, and a lowering of their religious status. Marie Ann Myeski, writing on medieval women, remarks that: 'By the end of the fourth century, the freedom and opportunity that may have marked the first generations of Christian women were for the most part a thing of the past'. (Myseki 1998:71) The Council of Laodicea (343 – 381AD) barred women from entering the altar area.<sup>20</sup> Successive councils, popes and synods, on the grounds of women's defiling nature, banned females from the sanctuary, from serving at the altar, from distributing communion, from touching

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<sup>18</sup> von Kellenbach considers that, since menstrual constraints were widely observed in Alexandria quite independently from Hebrew or rabbinic ritual law, church taboos and ritual were influenced not just by Jewish heritage but by broad contemporary culture. (Kellenbach 1994:112)

<sup>19</sup> Lady Chapel usually refers to a side chapel in a cathedral dedicated to Our Lady. See the website, <http://www.thenortheast.fsnet.co.uk/DurhamCathedral.htm> (accessed 16.05.06).

<sup>20</sup> Canon 44. <http://reluctant-messenger.com/council-of-laodicea.htm> (accessed 18.05.06).

sacred objects and vestments and from entering sacred (male) space.<sup>21</sup> In various dioceses menstruating women were banned from receiving communion and baptism (Bishop Timothy of Alexandria, 680 AD) and from visiting a church (Bishop Theodore of Canterbury 820 AD). Women who had given birth required reconciliation with the Church (Synod of Treves 1227), and those who had died in childbirth unreconciled could be denied burial in the churchyard, or might receive a secret burial. Following Pliny, menstruants throughout the medieval period were thought to cause bees to die, milk to sour, metal to rust and men, through intercourse, to become impotent and unsuccessful in war. (Raphael 1996a:179)

A mysogynistic ideology, argues Mayeski, continued with many medieval theologians: women were seen as 'threats to clerical establishments as well as to the general holiness of the church'. (Myeski 1998:79) Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century and influenced by Aristotle, argued against women taking holy orders on the grounds that they are, by their nature, incapable of the headship that is exclusive to males. It is a woman's biological body that makes her defective; she is the result of misadventure, something 'defective and misbegotten'.<sup>22</sup> He forbids intercourse with a menstruating woman as a mortal sin because of its detrimental effect on children.<sup>23</sup> Karen Armstrong neatly summarises the essentialist and phallogocentric attitude of medieval scholars toward women by commenting that, armed with Aristotelian philosophy and the Neoplatonist bias of the Early Church, they 'expressed their misogyny with confidence'. (Armstrong 1986:91)

Fear of women's natural powers and physical functions culminated in the great persecution of so-called witches in western Europe from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Jeffrey Russell notes that fear of witchcraft developed in the thirteenth century as sorcery (natural magic) became associated with heresy, and 'Heresy became the medium through which sorcery was linked with the Devil'. (Russell 1986:417) Russell remarks on the numbers of women persecuted, estimating a proportion of three females to every male accused. He suggests that, in a patriarchal environment, women living alone were socially weak and legally powerless, so offered an easy target as scapegoats for those misfortunes such as miscarriage and other common threats to a community. (1986:420)

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<sup>21</sup> See Haye van der Meer (1973) *Women Priests In The Catholic Church?* Philadelphia: Temple University Press pp.90-105, <http://www.womenpriests.org/classic2/meer04/asp> (accessed 18.05.06).

<sup>22</sup> *Summa Theologica* Q92 art 1 obj 1 quoted in Hamspon 1990:18.

<sup>23</sup> *Summa Theologica* Pt III Q 31 Art. 5 and Q64 Art 3-4. Referred to in Ranke-Heinemann, Uta (1990) *Eunuchs For Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality*, trans. Brownjohn, John, London: Andre Deutsch; extract from [www.womenpriests.org/tradtio/unclean.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/tradtio/unclean.htm) (accessed 10.08.05). According to Uta Ranke-Heinemann, argument persisted as to whether intercourse during menstruation was a mortal or venial sin, and until the beginning of the last century it was generally regarded as a venial sin due to its impropriety and deficient self-control.

A number of feminist writers (including Starhawk, Mary Daly and Carolyn Merchant) have drawn on the phenomenon of the witch hunts, but there has until recently been a lack of scholarly research into the historical events, and hence difficulty in the interpretation of historical data. The sources I use here (except for Russell) argue from an acknowledged feminist perspective. Witches were said to have special powers that could cause fruit trees to blight, crops to wither, storms to gather, cows to dry up and mares to miscarry. (Shuttle & Redgrove 1999:197) The witchcraze killed many women all over Europe who exercised such crafts as midwifery, herbalism, hypnotism and dowsing, thought to be associated with witchcraft. There is uncertainty about the numbers killed: Russell suggests about one hundred thousand, with millions persecuted; (Russell 1986:419) Mary Daly quotes figures from historical documents ranging from 30,000 to 9 million. (Daly 1979:183) The latter number is also given by Shuttle and Redgrove in *The Wise Wound*. (Shuttle & Redgrove 1999:198) The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), instigated in 1484 as a manual for inquisitors, stated that witchcraft derives from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable, and often involves deviant sexual behaviour. Russell notes that the book 'colourfully detailed the diabolical, orgiastic activities of the witches and helped persuade public opinion that a cosmic plot directed by Satan threatened all Christian society'. (Russell 1986:419) It sold more copies, in both Protestant and Catholic regions, than any book except the bible. (1986:419)

Merchant notes that the assumed sexual lust of women provided grounds for accusations of witchcraft, (Merchant 1983:134) and that several hundred women were put to death in the seventeenth century by Matthew Hopkins, 'witchfinder general', for allegedly having had intercourse with the devil. (1983:138) Methods for executing witches always avoided spilling blood, the locus of their power; hence Shuttle and Redgrove argue that the witchcraze was centred around 'one enormous menstrual taboo', a fear of the deep knowledge that women have about themselves when they pay attention to their own bodily functions and emotions that change with the moon and the tides. (Shuttle & Redgrove 1999:206-7) In Armstrong's words, it was the culmination of 'all the buried sexual fears that had been developing in the Christian West'. (Armstrong 1986:88) Russell similarly argues that the misogyny underlying the association of women with witchcraft grew up from deep and ancient psychological roots. In male-dominated religion, where the feminine holds a place of powerful ambivalence, the witch can be seen as the shadow side, the hag symbol, of the pure virgin and kindly mother symbolised by the Virgin Mary.

Beattie makes a link between the misogyny of the witchcraze and the androcentrism of Protestantism which emphasised masculine values of order and control, including subjugation of female sexuality, and 'sought to purge itself of the rich maternal fecundity of the Middle Ages'. (Beattie 2002:134). The Reformation, she argues, led to a privileging of the male sex in *imago Dei* whilst the female body was seen as a 'functional appendage intended only for marriage and procreation'. (2003:134) The Virgin Mary was erased from worship, along with other saints, and shrines and places of pilgrimage – including those of importance to women – were desecrated. The symbolic female body, according to Beattie, was expunged without any corresponding rehabilitation of actual female bodiliness into language and worship. (2003:135) It was in the years following the Reformation that the witchcraze reached its

climax, 'as the men of church, science and state together waged war on the female body in deed as well as in language and worship'. (2003:135) The executions continued in England until 1684 and in Scotland until 1727. (Russell 1986:420)

The Protestant reformers continued the view of menstruating women as subject to sexual and moral defilement. (Raphael 1996:173) Only ultimate salvation in heaven would transcend the ordinances of creation and punishment linking women with original sin and lust. Luther taught male dominance and extolled obedience to men, marriage and motherhood as the proper role for women. The causal link he made between women, dirt and inferiority is clear in his teaching that women have 'lots of filth and little wisdom'.<sup>24</sup> With a few notable exceptions, such as the Quaker movement, women were largely kept from education, decision-making and leadership roles on the grounds of their innate lowly status. The education and training of women for their presumed role in life was a matter of debate in the eighteenth century, and a number of books appeared discussing the nature of the ideal woman. Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) offered a passionate argument for women to take their place as productive members of society, rather than be forced into passivity and vanity by the need to please others. Wollstonecraft's plea came in the context of a prevailing culture of considerable diversity of practices and beliefs relating to women, yet where in general there was widespread subordination and devaluation of women. A number of women broke free from these stereotypes and restrictions, yet on the whole the belief still held that women's bodily functions rendered them unfit for education and leadership.

Women were assumed to be prone to irrationality and derangement, lacking resistance to evil because they were more 'natural' and therefore non-rational. Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, in their exploration of the formation of sexual relationships, contend that

While men's rational minds were meant to be able to control and direct their physical bodies (even if male rules of bodily contact were long observed more in the breaking than in the making)...women's relationships to blood and birth meant their 'fragile minds' were ruled by their demanding, unpredictable bodies' (Mellor & Shilling 1997:71)

Raphael argues that menstruation was assumed to require a lot of energy, so any exercise of intellectual judgement led to 'the degeneration of reproductive power...intellectual women would not only become sterile, but unfeminine freaks'. (Raphael 1996a:192) All in all, as broadcaster and writer Jeremy Paxman puts it in his historical overview of the English race, '[women were] well advised to steer clear of learning'. (Paxman 1999:226) Nineteenth century medical experts opined that education also caused hysteria, a term derived from the Greek word for womb and often associated with a disturbance of moral and intellectual faculties. Hysteria was regarded as a female condition and sometimes 'cured' by clitoral excision. Allowing women more rights might, according to some Victorian teaching, make them ill. Suicide and murder committed by women were thought to be hysterical symptoms of menstrual

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<sup>24</sup> Erlangen & Frankfurt (1826-57) 'D Martin Luthers sammtliche Weke', quoted in Wiesner, Merry 'Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys', in Loades 1990:123.

psychoses. (Raphael 1996a:192-3) At the turn of the twentieth century, Freud, writing on beliefs about menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, commented: 'it might almost be said that women are altogether taboo'.<sup>25</sup>

Notions of mystery, fear and disgust around the menses persist even today; taboos, ignorance and assumptions of uncleanness are not confined to the past. Adler comments that the notion of menstrual impurity remains strong, and that it is 'constitutive of the religious selfhood of women in Orthodox Judaism'. (Adler 1993:38) Science writer Natalie Angier has shown that even today, the vagina is regarded in many societies and by many people – even first-world medical practitioners – as 'dirty'. (Angier 1999:52)<sup>26</sup> Shuttle and Redrove, with the intention of shifting attitudes away from the idea that menstruation was Eve's curse but rather women's friend, searched for literature on the subject of the psychology of menstruation and found that, until the mid-1970s, no such literature existed. The subject of menstruation was evidently still taboo, kept under 'a blanket of ignorance'. (Shuttle & Redgrove 1999:15n) Frances Drake, priest for ten years, reports that following her ordination several male clergy would no longer speak to her or shake hands with her: 'It would appear that I had become unclean to them overnight'. (Gould 2004:15) She was once hissed at in the sanctuary during a service of the Eucharist and told not to touch the altar, or it would have to be re-consecrated. (2004:16) Grace Elliott, one of the first few women superintendents of the Church of the Lord, an African indigenous church in Ikorodu Agbowa, Epe, records that there remains some contention about women being ordained:

Now women do the same as men. However, there is still controversy on women presiding at Baptism and Holy Communion, and whether women should be allowed to enter the altar while they are menstruating. (Elliott 2000:2)

Whether denied, veiled or ignored, fear undoubtedly lingers. And that which is feared (according to the logic of patriarchy) must be overcome, ordered and controlled so that it poses less of a threat. Feminist research, building on relatively recent disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and psychology, critiques traditional, androcentric views on purity and defilement, including menstruation, in relation to religious practice. The menstrual taboo, according to Kristeva, hinges on viewing women's blood as threatening and polluting in a way that sperm is not. (Kristeva 1982:71) Raphael points out that female impurity, closely associated with female physiology, signals otherness, and that 'Pollution beliefs, of which those concerning menstruation are perhaps the most conspicuous, seem to function as instruments of power relationships in religion and hence society'. (Raphael 1996:135) Thus many traditional purification beliefs and rites articulate misogyny – a matter, according to Shuttle and Redgrove, of considerable hurt to women. (1999:21)

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<sup>25</sup> Freud, Sigmund 'The Taboo of Virginity, The Collected Papers' 8:75, quoted in Farley 1990:244.

<sup>26</sup> That these deep-seated fears and taboos are finally being addressed may be evidenced by the enormous success of Eva Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues*, which has been performed in dozens of languages and countries.

Recent feminist research has sought to rehabilitate menstruation from connotations of shame and fear. Spiritual feminism, for instance, seeks to revive what it sees as the sacred nature of menstruation, whose 'numinous discomposure' Raphael describes as 'precisely what qualifies women for high religious status'. (Raphael 1996a:86) Menstruation is then not an abhorrence but a 'manifestation of the numinous in female form'. (1996a:196) She accepts that menstruation carries an ambiguous charge, a degree of 'otherness', but argues that this is precisely because it is sacred. It is arguable that in sacralizing menstrual power, as in spiritual feminism, there is a healing effect that helps to overcome the tradition of otherness and exclusion caused not so much because women are profane, but because patriarchy senses that they are too sacred. Both patriarchy's abhorrence and spiritual feminism's celebration of menstruation acknowledge that women's blood has a powerful 'charge' because it approaches something of the divine source of life and death.

### ***Women, Self-sacrifice And Subjectivity***

In response to Christ's giving of his body and blood for our new life, worshippers offer at the Eucharist, in the words of Prayer A, their 'sacrifice of thanks and praise' whereby they give themselves in anticipation of the coming kingdom, to bring life and redemption to a broken world. Christ's once-for-all offering of himself for humankind evokes a response of self-giving in members of his Body on earth, 'offering ourselves as a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice'. (Rom 12:1). However, the themes of the self-surrendering Christ in terms of sacrificial victim, and of reciprocal self-sacrifice in relation to women, have been problematic for Christian feminists within the context and history of patriarchal culture. Feminists have critiqued traditional doctrines of sacrifice that leave women as scapegoats for a patriarchal interpretation of sin, whereby Jesus the sacrificial lamb has tended to be used to justify the victimisation of women – hence Raab's contention that women have been 'crucified' by patriarchal society. (Raab 1997:86) Beattie, noting the marginality of women to society where social cohesion is dependent on sacrificial violence, asks: 'Is this marginalisation in itself a form of scapegoating, collectively and possibly universally practised by men against women?' (Beattie 2006:211)

The notion of self-sacrifice in imitation of Christ has resulted in women being offered unrealistic and damaging feminine aspirations based on obedience, passivity and subordination. An inculturated tendency amongst women towards a sort of self-denial and non-assertiveness (usually for the sake of men) constrains attainment of full personhood. Classical theology has historically valued selfless love which, when interpreted from the male imaginary, has encouraged women to suppress their own desires and will, a self-destructive impulse whereby women have failed to develop their full potential. As Johnson puts it, a woman can be 'so concentrated on the needs of others or so dependent on their direction that [her] own personal center is diffused'. (Johnson 002:218)

The result of the Church's failure to challenge women to full adult freedom is that women fail to achieve selfhood and responsible agency, necessary attributes of Christian maturity. The traditional notion of personal salvation through self-denial and self-sacrifice has been criticised as oppressive to many women who are already suffering from low self-worth and lack of identity induced by a

phallogocentric culture in which the feminine/female is non-normative and nontheomorphic.<sup>27</sup> As Fran Porter comments in her study of the status of women in the Church today, when women are subordinate to men and where care and nurture are associated with the feminine/female, then 'self-denial itself finds a gendered expression within Christianity'. (Porter 2004:61) Self-denial for men can operate within the hierarchical social and theological order where their power over women remains intact, and 'women's self-denial serves to endorse male privilege'. (2004:62) Hence, for women, the combination of Christian self-sacrifice and self-denial within a dualistic framework diminishes women's struggle towards full personhood; women sacrifice themselves for the sake of men. Porter finds this to be the case in her interviews with a range of women; for some there is a growing sense of self-worth, but for other women she notes 'a sense of unworthiness, of failure, guilt, and of being nothing special'. (2004:62)

Valerie Saiving addresses the question of self-sacrifice in her seminal article 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View'. (Saiving 1979/92)<sup>28</sup> Basing her argument on the central fact of sexual difference and early divergence between masculine and feminine sexual development, she maintains that many characteristic emphases in theology – the human condition in terms of anxiety, estrangement, self-assertiveness, will-to-power, exploitation, objectification of other – are androcentric in nature and do not address the needs of contemporary women. 'The temptations of woman *as woman*', she maintains, 'are not the same as the temptations of man *as man*'. (1979/92:37) Temptations born out of the basic feminist character structure cannot be described in terms of pride and will-to-power, but are better suggested, according to Saiving, by:

triviality, distractibility and diffuseness; lack of an organising center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition...in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self. (1979/92:37)

A habit of self-sacrifice – surrendering herself to serve others' needs – can lead to a diminishment in a woman's ability to develop to her full potential and creativity. And traditional theology, based as it is on masculine experience of the human condition, with its emphasis on self-sacrifice and selfless love, encourages women to suppress their desires and impulses and to restrict them to the maternal role. Myra Blythe, reflecting on how women's willingness to serve and share is easily exploited, comments on how this tendency has been perpetuated by the Church, 'which has proclaimed the idea of service-without-limits as a Christian virtue to which all women should aspire'. (Blythe 2001:154) Judith Plaskow, reflecting on women's experience in the sense of the interrelation between cultural expectations and their internalisation, concludes that there is a correlation of human with male experience which impoverishes

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Mary Grey (1989) *Redeeming The Dream: Feminism, Redemption And Christian Tradition* London: SPCK; Julie, Hopkins, 'Radical Passion: A Feminist Liberation Theology' in Hampson, Daphne (1996) *Swallowing A Fishbone?* London: SPCK.

<sup>28</sup> Daphne Hampson, writing in 1990, remarks that this article, first published in 1960, is 'often taken to mark the beginning of the current wave of feminist theological writing'. (Hampson 1990:122)



theology, not least in the way it discourages women from taking responsibility for their own self-actualisation. (Plaskow 1980:3) Women's sin, then, is 'precisely the failure to turn toward the self'. (1980:151)

Women's learnt attitude of self-effacement has caused them to be destructive of themselves and their potential, since they fail to strive for self-actualisation. Mary Stewart van Leeuwen maintains that for women, there is a temptation to succumb to their dependence upon others for identity, thus encouraging self-abnegation, loss of self in socially directed roles and a refusal to develop one's gifts in service to God and others. (van Leeuwen 1993:170) Christine Smith argues that the emphasis on self-sacrifice can leave 'victimised women blaming themselves for the violence inflicted upon them.' (Smith 1993:214) Women thus take the blame for not being more self-giving and loving. Kroll offers a concrete example of a victim spirituality when she records that in her youth, it was fashionable for Christian women to be victims – that is, to be 'expected to immolate themselves in service, either through the sacrificial life of a holy nun or through giving themselves wholly to the service of their husbands and children'. (Kroll 2001:120)

The traditional emphasis given by the Church to the role of wife, mother and carer has reinforced discriminatory practices against women in public, social, religious and business spheres. Rosemarie Zapfl-Helbling reports that this situation is problematic when addressing the notion of equal rights from a political perspective. Religious stereotyping, she comments, reinforces women's and men's traditional positions in society and 'deprives them of the opportunity to take on responsibilities traditionally reserved for the other sex'. (Zapfl-Helbling 2005:7) The result is that women are not encouraged to take up responsibilities outside the home. In Catholic and Orthodox dominated areas in particular, 'the labour participation rates of women and the number of women in parliament are amongst the lowest (Spain being a notable exception)'. (2005:7)<sup>29</sup>

Stephanie Golden contends that women 'have been the ones most afflicted by [the] sacrificial ideal'. (Golden 1998:283) She addresses the issue of women who, faced with the icon of the maternal ideal and for fear of guilt, constantly disregard their own needs for those of others, whether husband, children, parents or work colleagues. Golden concludes that the self-sacrifice experienced by the everyday woman is 'in a sense rendered invisible by cultural constructions like the devoted-mother icon, which lead us to take the resulting behaviour for granted.' (1998:75) She maintains that 'it is not some essence of female nature that causes women to be overly self-sacrificing, but rather a basic component of psyche and society'. (1998:16) She traces this compulsion to self-sacrifice back through the history of the church, highlighting the Middle Ages, when the expansion in religious institutions and movements offered increasing opportunities for women to express their piety, not least through a

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<sup>29</sup> In its efforts to oppose sex discrimination whilst affirming the distinct identities of women and men, the Church And Society Commission of the Conference Of European Churches has drafted a policy paper, Gender Mainstreaming In The Church And Society Commission (May 2006). This paper recommends the integration of the gender perspective into every stage of policy processes so as to promote equality between women and men.

variety of ascetic practices. Suffering, as expiation of sin and in identification with Christ, was valued as a form of service.

Women's mysticism often involved physical hardship such as fasting, sometimes to the point of self-starvation and sleep deprivation. The emphasis on suffering as a form of service drew pious women particularly to fasting as a form of self-mortification that expiated evils associated with corporeality. Golden makes a connection between the extreme fasting practice of medieval female mystics and the contemporary focus on women's thinness: 'the modern woman's struggle with dieting took on the same overtones of renunciation and pain, sin and redemption, as the austerities of Catherine of Sienna'. (1998:146) Through conversations with a number of women, she reflects on the dichotomy between selfhood and sacrifice, urging women to be aware of such self-defeating behaviour in favour of an understanding of sacrifice that can be empowering and fulfilling. Women, not being so concerned with power and domination, are especially able to achieve personal selfhood whilst recognising the selfhood of the other. Appropriate sacrifice can maintain in balance solicitude for self and caring for others:

If inappropriate self-sacrifice reflects a self that is reduced to other in a world of polarities, constructive sacrifice is the expression of a self that expands to encompass both self and other. (1998:282)

Van Leeuwen argues that, rather than self-sacrifice, women require self-affirmation. (van Leeuwen 1993:170) For her, women's problem is a failure to resist oppression and develop their own gifts. (1993:71) There still exists the idea that a woman's identity rests mainly, if not solely, in her role as caretaker of others, a model which can be used to excuse the subordination of women's identity, so that they are coerced, for instance, to forgive and forget men's violent or sexually abusive behaviour towards them. (1993:412) The question of whether the model of *kenosis* is a helpful one for women has, since Saiving's article, been extensively debated by feminist writers.<sup>30</sup> For instance, Daphne Hampson, a one-time campaigner for the ordination of women who subsequently came to name herself a 'post-Christian', concludes that 'for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm'. (Hampson 1990/96:155)

Sarah Coakley, in contrast to Hampson, offers a defence of some form of *kenosis* as compatible with Christian feminism, embracing 'spiritual paradoxes of "losing one's life in order to save it."' (Coakley 1996:83)<sup>31</sup> For Coakley, silent prayer offers a medium that enables vulnerability and personal empowerment to be held together by 'creating the "space" in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself' (1996:84) - crucial for Coakley in her understanding of Christian feminism. This is not the sort of vulnerability that invites abuse or self-repression, but a means of 'personal empowerment, prophetic resistance,

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<sup>30</sup> See also Coakley, Sarah 'Kenosis And subversion: On The Repression Of "Vulnerability" In Christian Feminist Writing' in Hampson, Daphne (1996) *Swallowing A Fishbone* London: SPCK pp.82-111.

<sup>31</sup> This article also appears, under the same title, in Coakley, Sarah (2002) *Powers And Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*.

courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry' leading to the birthing of new self. (1996:110-111) This birthing of subjectivity through self-offering to and communion with God, an ancient wisdom re-worked through the lens of Christian feminism, is surely a positive and encouraging theme for women who struggle to find selfhood within a culture that has traditionally denied women their subjectivity. It goes some way to providing a mode of being that retains, as Beattie puts it:

a way of being that preserves the fragile sense of self that women are beginning to acquire in modern culture, while allowing that self to willingly abandon herself to God in the confidence that this God is an Other who participates in our personal becoming and makes us more rather than less the selves we seek to be. (Beattie 2006:73)

Following Saiving, feminist theology has sought to re-examine traditional categories of sin and redemption in the light of research into sexual difference. Considering Beattie's comment above, the problem in a nutshell is perhaps that men's sin of pride stems from too great a sense of the self, whilst women's sin of sloth results from an underdeveloped sense of self that is only now being addressed. Self-affirmation for women is perhaps at last not regarded as inconsistent with the feminine/female. Julie Hopkins, commenting on Saiving's work, points out that the traditional Protestant emphasis on personal salvation through transactional atonement has caused women to be 'psychologically conditioned and socially restricted to passive, self-denying and self-sacrificing roles' that lead to 'obsessive guilt, depression, neurosis and masochistic and manipulative behaviour'. (Hopkins 1996:75-76) In order to allow women to flourish, a Christology that acknowledges sexual difference must reject the notion that passive vicarious suffering is beneficial, 'either because God requires it as a moral duty, or because it is a just punishment for sin.' (1996:76)

Hampson, again following Saiving's article, claims that for women to name this type of 'sin' is very effective: 'to hear that it is their right and duty to take themselves seriously, that it matters who they are and what they think, is to turn Christian theology as they have imbibed it upside-down'. (Hampson 19996:123) Hampson notes that the notion of sin is closely linked to the notion of salvation, so that salvation in the Protestant theological tradition is seen as the breaking of self-centredness, of the sinful ego, to form a new self. She questions whether this analysis is appropriate for women, who have generally not suffered from an egotistical self, or experienced domination of others. 'Rather than breaking the self', she comments, 'women...need to come to themselves'. (1996:127) She suggests that a better way for women to envisage salvation is as a healing of the self, 'as a person coming to be all that she may be in a network of relationships'. (1996:127)

Jantzen, commenting on Saiving's and Hampson's work, posits the notion of salvation as healing. (Jantzen 1998:159) Her model of flourishing rather than salvation as a root metaphor offers, she argues, a philosophy of religion in which 'natality is deliberately evoked in the task of becoming divine', so that space is created for the woman subject. (1996:170) Since achieving subjectivity entails entering into the symbolic, then women must find their own language so that subjectivity can emerge. For many women, this language may be expressed in the form of the care and nurture of others, but this would take place from a point

of genuine calling and free agency rather than of cultural assumptions and pressure to conform to a stereotypical ideal. The imitation of Christ, then, need not mean passive self-sacrifice but rather active – and perhaps subversive and counter-cultural– self-sacrifice born from liberation by grace into free will and responsible moral agency. A concrete example in the arena of theology from a female perspective is that of Brigalia Bam, a black South African speaker at the World Council Of Churches who encouraged women globally to talk about liberation and to prepare for the participation of women in the WCC's fifth assembly in Nairobi, 1975. The occasion was seen as a breakthrough since, as Letty Russell puts it, 'women took their concerns into their own hands and began talking across continents and acting together'. (Russell 2001:131)

## CHAPTER 11

### NEW COVENANT, NEW CONFIDENCE – THE WOMAN PRIEST

*'Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the New Covenant'*

The woman priest bears witness to the anachronism of the assumption that women's blood is ritually impure or defiling, and so she is part of the challenge to what Brian Wren calls the 'longstanding failure of love towards females'. (Wren 1989:54) She reinforces the understanding prevalent in all strands of feminism that bodies are a matter for celebration rather than shame. A body that menstruates does not have to be seen as polluting: it can validly be understood as holy. The implications of this for liturgy are significant: if menstruation is linked not with impurity and shame but with creativity and even sacredness, then this will have consequences in the evolution of worship. The potency of women's generative power remains, but it will be celebrated in new, creative ways that are empowering for women and enriching for all believers.

#### ***Women And Sacrifice In The Anglican Tradition***

Ian Bradley, in his book *The Power Of Sacrifice*, notes that: 'the ordination of child-bearing women in the Church of England is not a symbolically insignificant event'. (Bradley 1995:5)<sup>1</sup> That women priests include those who are of childbearing age is significant in that the symbolism evoked by them is freighted with that fear and loathing associated with women's bloodshed through menstruation and childbirth. The symbolism of blood is not only ingrained deeply in the texts of Christianity; it is also, for Bradley, 'deeply subversive – not least in its relations to the feminine.' (1995:17) Women's blood has, in the male-dominated religious imaginary, kept them away from the practice of sacrifice. The question arises as to what it is about the theology of sacrifice that seems so inimical to women's interests, whilst at the same time dominating liturgical practice and shaping the identity of the Church. I argue here that the issue of the woman priest *vis a vis* blood sacrifice is problematic, not least at a psychological level; but it is also subversive in the sense of destabilising the dominant phallogocentric religious imaginary and in positing powerful feminine/female symbols that promote women's subjectivity.

I have noted the powerful charge carried by blood, and the intimate connection between blood and sacrifice. The foregoing brief sketch of historical attitudes towards women's bloodshed through menstruation and childbirth highlights the association in patriarchal cultures of these natural phenomena with mysterious

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<sup>1</sup> Although he does not acknowledge the source, Bradley is here quoting directly from Janet Soskice's paper, 'Blood And Defilement' (Soskice 1994) delivered to the Society For The Study Of Theology Conference, Oxford, p.5. The paper has since been published in *ET: Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* (Tübingen: Heft 2, 1994), abridged in *Bulletin of Harvard Divinity School* (January 1995) and as 'Blood And Defilement: Reflections On Jesus And The Symbolics Of Sex' in Kendall, Daniel SJ and Stephen T Davis, eds (2001) *The Convergence Of Theology* Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

powers, impurity and defilement, leading to taboos and the perceived need for regulatory systems. Women's blood in relation to sacrifice has remained a strong taboo, as evidenced by the exclusion of women from holy spaces and places, especially around the altar and in terms of priesthood.

The exclusion of women from the practice of sacrifice is addressed by Irigaray who, as we have seen, accords a central focus to the body as the locus of divine revelation. For her, humanity's alienation from divinity and nature can be attributed to a patriarchal order where redemption is effected through denial of the body and through sacrifice performed by men.<sup>2</sup> Irigaray credits the objectification of women by men in western phallogocentric culture to the child's Oedipal sacrifice of its desire for the maternal body, the act of 'original matricide' on which western religious imaginary, society and culture operate. (Irigaray 1993c:11) The result of this phallogocentric logic is a culture of hostility towards women and nature, both of which are closely associated with the body of the mother. The feminine/female is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex (the male) that alone holds a monopoly on value. How, then, can women initiate certain rites that allow them to live and become women in all dimensions? Irigaray argues that sexual indifference, leading to the objectification of women and their exclusion from the social order, lies at the heart of every discourse. Hence, as I noted earlier, her project to posit the notion of a (yet to be realised) nonphallogocentric subjectivity; and her exposition of the blind spots of theology that currently conceal the feminine/female as a locus for the divine.

The sexual indifference characteristic of phallogocentric logic would seem to be a particularly problematic issue with regard to women and sacrifice, since investigations in the field of sociology, anthropology and psychology reveal sacrifice to be an almost universally male practice aimed specifically at excluding, controlling and diminishing the powers of women. Irigaray, whose search for women's subjectivity questions what constrains women from becoming divine, is especially critical of the exclusion (in the Roman Catholic tradition) of women from the celebration of the Eucharist. Here, she argues, men have banished women from the sphere of the divine whilst relying on women's resources. When the priest recites the Eucharistic Prayer, Irigaray wonders whether, 'according to the rite that celebrates the sharing of food and that has been ours for centuries,' he should be reminded that 'he would not be there if our body and our blood had not given him life, love, spirit. And that he is also serving us up, we women-mothers, on his communion plate'. Women cannot celebrate the Eucharist, she continues, since 'If they were to do so, something of the truth that is hidden in the communion rite would be brutally unmasked'. (1993c:21) Part of that truth, according to Irigaray, is the church's manifest misogyny in allowing women's bodiliness to be posited as the locus of sin and in modelling itself on a father-son genealogy where women are ignored or reduced to the status of mother. Women's priesthood, by contrast, rehabilitates to language and culture the maternal body hitherto sacrificed by patriarchal religion. As Beattie puts it, Irigaray sees the historic failure of Christianity, in the context of masculine society and its tendency towards violence, as 'its celebration of sacrifice at the expense of fecundity'. (2006:307)

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Women, the Sacred, Money' in *Sexes And Genealogies*, (1993c) pp.75-88.

The phallogocentric logic of sacrifice in Christianity and in other religions has been examined by Nancy Jay who, in noting its universally male exclusivity, comments: 'In no other major religious institution is gender dichotomy more consistently important, across unrelated traditions, than it is in sacrifice'. (Jay 1992:xxiii) She observes, in the gender-related social logic of the ritual, the polarity of social meaning between sacrificial purity and the pollution of childbirth. 'What is it about childbirth', she asks, 'that can only be undone by sacrifice?' (1992:284) If women ever perform sacrificial rituals, it is as virgins or crones, not child-bearers. Jay notes the symbolic opposition between sacrifice and childbirth in Israelite culture, where sacrifice removes or brings to an end the pollution effected by childbirth or menstruation. She contends that the practice of sacrifice, in maintaining patrilinear descent through fathers and sons, transcends dependence on childbearing women. It identifies not biological but social and religious descent, confirming membership of the group. In Christianity, the lineage is the Apostolic succession of clergy, 'a truly perfect "eternal line of descent" in which authority descends from father to father, through the one "Son made perfect forever"'. (1992:37) By this means - through fathers and sons rather than mothers and daughters - is obtained integration into the 'eternal' social order transcending mortality. Sacrifice expiates the consequences of having been born of woman and integrates the eternal patrilineage, allowing the patrilinear group to transcend both mortality and birth. (1992:40) Hence, 'sacrifice is doubly a remedy for having been born of woman'. (1992:40)

Jay notes that conflict between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches over ordination of women has in some quarters centred around the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist. For the (Catholic) Sacred Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith, the ordination of women is an insuperable obstacle to reconciliation between the two denominations, including a consensus on the nature of sacrifice. Sacrifice is seen by some, as Jay says, to identify and maintain 'an "eternal", exclusively male, system of unilinear descent' that was broken in the Church of England in the sixteenth century. (1992:127) Understanding the sociology of the Eucharist therefore depends on recognising the 'power of sacrifice as a ritual instrument for establishing and maintaining an enduring male-dominated social order'. (1985:304) Bearing in mind the religious import of blood and sacrifice, it is understandable that women are less accepted as priests where the symbolic significance of sacrifice in worship, and the concomitant role of the priest, are analogically highly developed.

Taking Jay's argument that sacrifice is a means of constituting lines of patrilinear descent, William Beers contends that the meaning and origin of blood sacrifice lie not just in the patrilinear superstructure of a society, but also in the closely correlated psychological structure. This he examines, concluding that his work suggests a 'disturbing view of male psychology and religion', (Beers 1992:181) and, building on Jay's sociological work, that 'men seek to control lineal descent out of their own male psychological structure'. (1992:11-12) Blood sacrifice, he argues, 'is a highly evocative ritual experience', a subject which 'affects us so viscerally, and intellectual rationalization - the so-called logic of sacrifice - never fully satisfies.' (1992:10) Writing from an anthropological and psychological point of view, and in particular applying the insights of the self-psychology

movement in psychoanalysis,<sup>3</sup> Beers examines gender specificity in sacrifice and traces this to the differentiated early development of women and men. He notes the male violence inherent in blood sacrifice:

Like others I too have been lured by the darker existential question of what motivates men to do what they do. Why do they make things bleed and die in the name of the sacred? (1992:10)

He relates the violence of blood sacrifice to other forms of male violence, including the subordination of women, which he associates with the psychological function of sacrificial ritual. The desire for children and for immortality are part of a male psychological constellation involving the envy, desire and fear of women. The patrilinear kinship system is based on a binary opposition of a father/mother, male/female dichotomy. Males feel more threatened by factors affecting their sense of self-esteem, prestige and power because they have experienced the omnipotent maternal self-object as Other,<sup>4</sup> rather than experiencing themselves (as females do) as subjective extensions of the self-object. (1992:138) Men can never identify fully with that self-object as women can. They also feel more anxious than women about marginality, which threatens their more rigid ego boundaries and induces narcissistic anxiety,<sup>5</sup> 'the psychological place where men and women most differ with regards to marginality.' (1992:139) Women identify more easily with and internalise marginality, whereas men respond with a narcissistic experience of dread. The ambivalent anxiety of men about women is 'channelled through and expressed in symbolic ritual blood sacrifice'. (1992:180) The male psychological apparatus experiences sacred pollution as a threat of self-disintegration, which can lead to rage and possibly violence. (1992:140) In expiation sacrifice:

that which evokes disgust (the threat of fragmentation by the intrusive idealized self-object) is classified as 'not-me' and is symbolically embodied in a surrogate or substitute victim which is killed or scapegoated. (1992:143)

The self-object is (psychologically) split into good and bad parts so as to maintain the idealised classifications of reality, and for men, these split-off parts are usually experienced around women, sex and childbirth. Hence, Beers argues:

the violence of sacrifice...is also a socially transformed expression of the rage resulting from the failed identification with the omnipotence of the idealized self-object. (1992:144)

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<sup>3</sup> Self psychology, developed by Heinz Kohut, became a major movement in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in the United States. See <http://www.selfpsychology.org/whatis.htm> (accessed 29.05 06).

<sup>4</sup> A self-object experience, in terms of self psychology, is one (usually with other people) that nurtures the self and defines the experience of self and self-esteem. See <http://www.selfpsychology.org/whatis.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Narcissism, in self psychology, is the weak, vulnerable self attempting to uphold self-cohesion and reinforce self-esteem.



The ritual violence of sacrifice is, according to Beers, an ancient means by which men identify with each other as men, gaining self-affirmation and self-validation, whilst separating themselves from women. This conceals the male desire for identifying with and gaining power of the maternal self-object. Hence, ritual blood sacrifice embodies male and male-identified anxiety and men's symbolic attempts to grasp and control the experienced power of women. Beers sees this in the Early Church with patriarchy's efforts to maintain the male descent group through the apostolic succession by means of the eucharistic re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice, culminating in the establishment of the patrilinear, sacerdotal priesthood and exclusion of women from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. For Beers, the ritual consumption of Christ's body parallels that of the nurturing body of the mother. (1992:176) This substitution of male for female is a logical outcome of a theology of sin reflecting 'the male psychological experience of an intrusive maternal self-object (i.e. defilement) and separation from the same self-object (i.e. abandonment).' (1992:176-7) The fraction of the bread, representing the sacrifice of Christ, symbolises 'the fragmentation of the self resulting from the intrusive idealized maternal self-object'. (1992:177) The sacrifice becomes the definitive self-fragmentation, which negates the power of the defiling and abandoning maternal self-object, replacing it with a nurturing, masculine holy communion, undefiled and un-abandoned.<sup>6</sup>

An ingrained fear and resentment of the power of women still linger, especially around the practice of ritual sacrifice. Where this is not the case, 'the idea of the Eucharist as sacrifice has probably lost its psychological connection to women and sin'. (1992:167) Indeed, despite the fact of women's ordination to the priesthood, the 'male function of sacrifice psychologically precludes women from performing the act'. (1992:167)

### ***Gender, Sacrifice And The Woman Priest***

In the Anglican Church, the question is where the discourse about gender and sacrifice leaves women, and particularly the woman priest, in relation to the Eucharist. The evident deep-rooted association of death and gender in phallogentric culture links women with nature, corporeality, impurity and sin whilst suppressing the significance of the maternal body and of natality. The body of the mother induces both longing and desire, anxiety and fear, leading to strategies of control and suppression. If blood sacrifice, with its connotations of death and violence, is a phallogentric remedy for having been born of woman, whose function is to control and diminish women, then is it possible for the woman priest to preside with integrity at the eucharistic rite? Can the woman priest assume to perform sacrifice with psychological validity or, as Beers argues, is this an impossibility? Is sacrifice solely the prerogative of men, an act so intimately associated with the male psyche and with male-dominated society that women neither have a place in it, nor should desire to, since it perpetuates the male remedy for having been born of woman and upholds the patriarchal social structure? If, as feminists claim, theology begins in experience, and

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<sup>6</sup> Naomi Goldenberg suggests that religious rituals in general (in contrast to the 'male' rite of sacrifice) allow men to partake in 'acceptable' feminised acts that simultaneously deny women's agency. See 'The Divine Masquerade: A Psychoanalytic Theory About The Play Of Gender On Religion' (O'Grady, Gilroy & Gray 1998 pp.188-208).

women's experience in relation to sacrifice is one of perceived impurity and hence exclusion and diminishment of selfhood, then does this not for women call into question the validity of the concept and practice of sacrifice itself?

Diane Jonte-Pace, reviewing the contribution of feminist research to the psychology of religion, argues that women priests are simply a minor variation in a stable patriarchal pattern: 'We let women act like men: we let women remedy or repudiate maternal birth.'(Jonte-Pace 1997:68) By presiding at the Eucharist, then, women are not performing a radically transformative function but simply 'become male' and remedy maternal birth within a deeply-rooted patriarchal structure that is highly resistance to change. Jonte-Pace consequently advocates a 'cautious analysis and critique of the cultural and psychological symbolism of sacrifice' in relation to the ordination of women. (1997:68)

I suggest, however, that it is possible to find a way through what appears to be a cultural and psychological impasse. I have already noted Jantzen's project to reverse the imaginary of death inherent in masculinist structures of thought by taking account of ourselves as natals as much as mortals. (Jantzen 1998b:108) Her concept of natality, rooted in the maternal, the bodily and the material, seeks to uncover new possibilities based on the acknowledgement of birth and hence of the embodied and gendered, the physical and material. (1998c:145) She does not address the issue of Eucharist or sacrifice directly. However, her emphasis on the concept of natality, and so on birth and nurturing, and her proposal for a theology of flourishing, may be a starting point in exploring alternative interpretations of sacrifice more appropriate to a developing feminine/female religious imaginary. In other words, through this means it may be possible to find a way of understanding sacrifice that can counterbalance traditional symbols linked to death with symbols linked to birth and nurturing, and so help to overcome the difficulty of sacrifice as at heart an exclusively male prerogative.

I earlier noted Ricoeur's argument that the domain of symbol is best approached through a contemplative dialogue between our own personal experience and the symbol's richness of meaning. (Ricoeur 1974:297) Interpretation allows us to 'hear again', to understand the symbol's meaning which may be iconoclastic in relation to others. (1967:354) Jantzen offers such a reinterpretation in her proposal of a concept of natality which disrupts the ancient connection of male with spirit and goodness and the female with nature and sinfulness. (Jantzen 1998c:163) The punitive and expiatory interpretations of Jesus' death, she maintains, could be balanced in a theology of flourishing with Jesus as a model for what it means to become divine. Jantzen acknowledges that some feminists seek to replace rather than re-envisage traditional doctrines, for instance of sacrifice and atonement. However, her own approach is simply to make associations between

patriarchy, the necrophilic imaginary, and the model of salvation on the one hand, and between feminist possibilities, an imaginary of natality, and the model of flourishing on the other. (1996c:164)

An implicit concept of natality and its outworking in Christian worship is evident among a number of contemporary feminist writers. Irigaray promotes alternative methods of resolving conflict that do not imitate the sacrificial violence that is the territory of men. (Irigaray 1991:146) She looks to the rhythms of nature and

cycles of fertility as an alternative source for women's rites, arguing that women's fertility, their bodies and blood, need to be symbolised. For her, the solution to the 'murder of the mother', exemplified in exclusively male sacrifice, is to assert the genealogy of women in order for women to gain subjectivity. She envisions a humanity cleansing itself of the sin of sexual indifference by means of a woman celebrating the Eucharist with her mother, 'giving her a share of the fruits of the earth blessed by them both'. Thus she might be 'hallowed by her identity as a woman'. (1993c:21)

Critiquing Jay's sociological work on the phallogocentric nature of Christian sacrifice, Kelley Raab draws on feminist studies in the psychology of religion to reflect on the role of the woman priest in sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> Raab sees male-dominated sacrifice as an expression of gender reversal in imitating the female reproductive role. Maternally based envy and fear motivate the symbolic appropriation of female function in the Eucharist. For Raab sacrifice, whether performed by men or women, symbolises the tension of the separation-individuation process and expresses ritually the course of infant-mother differentiation. The sacrificing woman would convey the same infant separation-individuation process, but in 'symbolic modes characteristic of female rather than male infant-mother concerns'. (1997:86) Both modes are grounded in separation from the mother whilst remaining in some sense connected, and so fit the 'unifying logic of sacrifice as communion and expiation' as outlined by Jay. (1997:86) Raab comments that women priests, in sacrificing, are performing a radically transformative function. There is a very powerful female symbolism evoked by the sacrificing woman priest, which is as yet not clearly defined. When women sacrifice, they 'subvert the matrophobic symbol system which is constituted, in part, by the exclusion of women'. (1997:86) The woman at the altar symbolises, among other things, the experience of God as mother, and hence notions of nurture, connection and sensuality. These are all pre-oedipal themes which, through symbolic association, 'become more prominent in the Eucharist when women are celebrants.' (1997:87)

Beattie argues that the Eucharist is already freighted with the symbolism of fertility as well as death, with its emphasis on 'the maternal activity of nurturing the faithful.' (Beattie 1996:10) In the Eucharist, maternal images can open the imagination not only to the crucified Jesus but also to 'the mother's love for her child, a maternal sacrifice of love and care for the salvation of the world'. (Beattie 1996:257) Hence, it is more appropriate for the priest who symbolically mediates that nurturing with the body and blood of Christ to be a woman. However, speaking from a Roman Catholic perspective where any discussion about women's priesthood can only be academic, she notes a 'latent fear of the relationship between violence and blood', and suggests that a solution lies not in masking the problem by adopting an androgynous model of priesthood, but by 'daring to ask what it is about women's bodies that makes them such a threat to the male priesthood'. (1996:7)

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<sup>7</sup> Raab cites a number of instances of ancient blood sacrifice performed by women, which lead her to challenge Jay's conclusion that such sacrifice is *solely* a means of male appropriation of female powers. (1997:82)

Among the range of symbolic associations raised by the sacrificing woman priest, Raab suggests those of the 'crucifixion' of women by patriarchy, and the giving by women of body and blood to birth new life – 'a "gender reversal" of male and female reproductive roles'. (Raab 1997:86). The connection between cross, blood and birth is also made by Soskice, who observes that the symbolism of the New Testament is constantly disruptive. Whereas Leviticus bans the consuming of blood, Jesus institutes this. Leviticus lays down regulations for the defilement of childbirth; John's Gospel tells of God giving birth to the chosen. (Soskice 1994a:17) In the nuanced symbolic orderings of Christianity, ancient symbols are 'constantly challenged, broken open, renewed', (1994a:18) so that birth, a potent signifier can be seen, along with death, as a type of sacrificial giving. (1994a:13) This theoretical analysis is grounded in the experience of Anglican priest Una Kroll, who observes that when she presides at the Eucharist, she is aware of the close analogy between the bloody death of Christ - his suffering to bring in the New Covenant - and childbirth, where 'women hurt and bleed to bring new life into the world'. (Kroll 2001:118) Kroll provides a concrete example of Raab's assertion that, with female celebrants, the Eucharist can be seen as relating to female generative power, and thus can be a celebration of women's bodiliness which will in time subtly subvert the patriarchal tradition. Hence female genealogical structures through the mother would be re-established, so that the practice of sacrifice could no longer be seen (to hark back to Jay) as a remedy for 'having-been-born-of-woman'. (Jay 1997:88)

Susan Ross, noting that work on early gender identification demonstrates more permeable ego boundaries amongst girls, asks whether this calls into question 'the very basis for sacraments as ritual activity set apart from ordinary life'. (Ross 1993:197) If Christian sacramentality is at heart expressive of male separation, with the secular and sacred as binary opposites, then perhaps a feminist sacramental theology is impossible. However, argues Ross, understanding sacramentality as incarnational – with God coming to the world through the body of a woman – causes women's experiences to 'cast a different light on sacramental theology and practice'. (1993:198) Women's empathy with the other, their sense of interconnectedness and reluctance to make separations are, according to Ross, closer to the Christian ideal than the traditional tendency towards strict separation. In relation to the Eucharist, Ross argues that the rite should not be 'a symbol of power, to be held tightly by a male clerical caste', but a 'lavish gift to be shared', a feast that is 'a living symbol of the openness and generosity of the Christian community'. (1993:204-205) Following Ross's argument, and borrowing Irigaray's language, women would then be seen as a medium of the sensible transcendental, through which our understanding of the sacramental would broaden and deepen, and at the same time act as a critique and corrective to the sacramental tradition.

The arguments put forward here, including Jantzen's concept of natality, Soskice's and Raab's idea of birth as a type of sacrificial giving, and Ross's notion of Eucharist as a gift to be shared, all counterbalance traditional, phallogocentric interpretations which uphold patriarchal power (including the male clerical elite) whilst denying women's experience and power. Grounded in incarnational theology, they re-connect the sacrament with daily, embodied life, acknowledging the corporeal and sensual. They provide grounds for a positive

theology of sacrifice from a feminist perspective which recognises divine self-disclosure through the medium of the feminine/female and so allows women priests to celebrate with validity and integrity. Women's priesthood thus encourages a broadening of the symbolism of sacrifice to incorporate the nuances of sexual difference. By this means sacrifice can be interpreted not solely in terms of death and violence as a remedy for maternal birth, but also in terms of the feminine/female qualities of natality and nurturing, of gift and flourishing. The practical outworkings of such a shift in the traditional symbolism associated with an all-male sacrificial system is articulated by Linda Walter, a minister of the chalice in Australia:

I stand in the sanctuary with a brimming chalice of red fragrant wine in my hands...I know how to put this cup to these lips. I am mother. I stoop and rise. I am nurse. I am woman who knows about blood...No one has to show me how to do this. I have been doing it all my life it seems. I am at home in the sanctuary in this supremely ordinary act – this sacrament which focuses all our acts of feeding, all our meals, all our ordinary day to day relating and depending on one another. (Walter 2003:15)

Walter illustrates, I believe, that the concept of natality in relation to sacrifice engenders maternal symbolism associated with the theme of the shedding of blood in order to bring forth new life; and that from a feminist perspective, such symbolism is more appropriate to women's experience and imagination than that of violence and death. With recognition of these aspects of sacrifice, women would not simply be assimilated into the traditionally androcentric culture and practices of the Church, but rather their difference would be acknowledged and welcomed as bringing yet greater richness to the panoply of religious symbolism that informs doctrine and practice.

Ruether maintains that, in the Church, 'There is an avoidance of recognizing the way [a woman's] mere presence as a female in the Christian "sacred spaces" changes the symbolic and psychic dynamics of relationship to the holy'. (Ruether 1990:17) The subversive nature of women's presence in the priesthood is perhaps nowhere more evident than at the altar, where the entire culture of the exclusively male practice of blood sacrifice is now challenged and reinterpreted by a new iconoclastic symbolism grounded in the feminine/female. Until the advent of the woman priest, such symbolism was hardly visible in the Anglican tradition (except in those high church communities where the Virgin Mary played a part in their devotional lives). The past generation or so of women have looked for identity with few appropriate models of the feminine/female, religious or otherwise, but only the ancient dual figures of the virgin and the whore. Marion Woodman, writing in the early 1980s, describes the negative legacy passed for generations from mother to daughter of the repression of sexuality and bodiliness, so that women 'are having to reunite their sense of themselves as emotional, thinking and spiritual beings with a sense of themselves as sexual, passionate creatures.' (Woodman 1982:119) Woodman urges that every woman should find the particular feminine archetype that gives meaning to her own life. (1998:129) I suggest that the woman priest – a figure, with all its attendant symbolism of sexual difference and of the maternal divine, that was not available at the time Woodman was writing – is such an archetype that encourages women in their quest for subjectivity.

Beattie (as a Roman Catholic) suggests that there is an intuitive resistance to the acknowledgement of God's maternal creative power and of the capacity of both women and men to 'represent the difference and desire that constitutes the dynamics of theo-drama'. (Beattie 2006:310) Within her own tradition this has led to 'a violent struggle to block such possibilities'. (2006:310) However, with ever greater numbers of women entering the Anglican priesthood, we may be seeing the beginning of a far-reaching development that not only acknowledges women's presence and experience but also celebrates the powerful charge and symbolism inherent in the feminine/female which is mediated by women, not least in their blood, and which validly reflects aspects of the maternal divine.

### ***A Model For Our Time***

The notion of radically free, possibly subversive human agency is, I suggest, a key theme for a theology of women's priesthood. I have argued that, using Jantzen's concepts of natality and flourishing, the traditional phallogocentric symbolism of death and violence around the rite of sacrifice can be counterbalanced by the symbolism of maternal care and nurturing of new life, of embodiment, of gift and fecundity, of sexuality and the nuances of sexual difference. The woman priest thus evokes a greater abundance in the religious imaginary as it acknowledges and incorporates the feminine/female and subtly changes the psychic dynamics of our relation to the divine. The question of *kenosis* which has traditionally scapegoated women and left them subject to victimisation can be addressed by a theology of self-sacrifice that encourages, not passive suffering for its own sake, but a conscious abandonment in God, engendering a birthing of subjectivity through personal empowerment that overcomes previous assumptions justifying self-abnegation. The practising woman priest, whilst always conscious of her unworthiness before God to represent Christ and his Church, has necessarily been subject to a protracted period of spiritual formation, of selection and of training. She therefore witnesses to others that women are not inevitably constrained by a tendency to the sin of sloth that causes a failure to develop the self.

Since she is herself in a representative position, she renders outdated the tendency to associate maleness with all human experience and encourages responsibility, in women especially, to strive for self-actualisation in the image of God. Her own being as a woman encourages other women to realise their ultimate goodness and value – a pattern of being which many women do not adopt easily. By the nature of her calling, she witnesses to the efficacy of constructive self-sacrifice that seeks to serve others in the edification of the Church, not least through the development of personal spiritual gifts. In having found herself through being birthed into a new life in Christ, she serves as a model to other women to develop a relationship with God that encourages them to find their own language in the process of their personal becoming. Such a process may well prove to be counter-cultural, since it will involve destabilising asymmetrically gendered symbols that simply propagate or reinforce unjust patterns of inequality.

Among other anachronistic notions of inequality that the woman priest challenges is the notion of ritual impurity associated with women's blood. Standing at the altar, she finally renders unjustifiable the fear and disgust that women's bloodshed evokes. The icon for sin pictured by Ezekiel as the

exposed *niddah*, shunned by society is shown to be a product of phallogocentric psyche and society which makes an essential correlation of sin and the feminine/female. The woman priest demonstrates that the icon in fact points not to the nontheomorphism of women but to the error of patriarchy in adopting an essentialist approach towards sexual difference that associates the feminine/female with impurity and inferiority.

The woman priest helps to bring to birth a language of the symbolic and sacramental by which female as well as male sexuality is celebrated as a wholesome part of creation. With her the actual maternal, female body, with its corporality and sensuality, is embraced in the symbolisms of the religious imagination, so a space is opened up for the acknowledgement and expression of sexual difference in liturgical and sacramental thought and practice. The feminine/female no longer symbolises the sinful Eve, the heretic and the harlot depicted by Hosea and Ezekiel. Rather, it is acknowledged as capable of bearing sacramental signification, and can now take its full place at the heart of the Christian sacramental tradition, celebrating the central themes of birth and fecundity, sexuality and corporeality that are associated with the maternal body. The fact of women's priesthood bears witness to that sacramental signification, and yet there is as yet no fully developed subjectivity or language for the feminine/female. What models are there for the woman priest, and hence for all women, to aspire to? Kristeva remarks that, in the 'second phase' of feminism (1968 onwards),

women, who are primarily interested in the specificity of feminine psychology and its symbolic manifestations, seek a language for their corporeal and intersubjective experiences, which have been silenced by the cultures of the past. (Kristeva 1995:208)

The woman priest might reasonably ask what images can be excavated from the Christian tradition in order to help to develop such a language. I suggest that Mary Magdalene offers such an image.

I noted earlier that the Gospels give a picture of women amongst Jesus' community playing important and key roles in the climax to the story of his ministry and message. Amongst these women Mary Magdalene is crucial in spreading the news of the resurrection to the other disciples. Recorded as accompanying Jesus on his travels (Luke 8:2), she is described as one from whom seven demons had come out. Mary is again mentioned by name in the Gospels at several key events leading to the resurrection. In the accounts of Matthew, Mark and John she is among a group of women at the crucifixion, 'watching from a distance' (Mat 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41) or 'near the cross' (John 19:25). Matthew records her presence with another woman whilst Jesus' body is placed in the tomb (Mat 27:61). Mary figures most prominently in the resurrection accounts in all of the gospels.<sup>8</sup> In the listings of women present, her name usually appears first (even before that of the Virgin Mary), suggesting recognition of her prominent position in the community of followers. The Lucan resurrection narrative stresses the validity of a woman's testimony as a witness. It is Mary Magdalene and other women who announce the Good News to the men, including the Apostles whose authority would rest on having witnessed the

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-11, Luke 24:1-11, John 20:1-8.

risen Christ (Luke 24:10), but who at first dismiss the women's words as nonsense. It is left to Peter to overcome the contemporary prejudice against women's testimony and go to look for himself.

John's resurrection account is the most detailed and affective in relation to Mary Magdalene (20:1-18). She starts out one morning to perform the feminine work of anointing Jesus' body, and proceeds to proclaim the Easter message to the men. At the beginning of John 20 the author presents a distraught and grieving woman who, through the next few verses, takes a profoundly significant journey of faith. Initially, Mary (alone in this account) sustains the shock of finding no body in the tomb. In her distressed state, she runs to tell the followers and stands back whilst Peter and the other disciple investigate the baffling emptiness of the tomb. Once the men have left, she sees two angels, but even God's messengers do not lift her horizons above the present sorrow of her bereavement. On turning away from the tomb she sees Jesus but does not recognise him until he calls her by name (John 20:16), a deeply poignant moment that speaks of the transformation that occurs in the journey of faith when a believer come to know herself as she is and is liberated to move outward towards others. She is the model for the journey of faith that leads from confusion and anguish to recognition, maturity and informed action. In response Mary names Jesus: her 'Rabouni!' (John 20:16) acknowledges their relationship and her role as follower and disciple. Her immediate reaction of clinging to Jesus suggests that she has yet to progress psychologically and emotionally from her present euphoria.<sup>9</sup> Jesus' instructions not to cling physically to him but to spread the message to his disciples, move her on from preoccupation with his physical presence to a spiritual reality – the Ascension and beyond - and the commission of an apostolic task.

Mary's pilgrimage thus takes another direction as she obeys the command and sets out with the news of the risen Lord. She moves in her dependency on Jesus from abject lover and mourner to mature apostle. Jesus, the risen Lord, depends on Mary to take forward the resurrection message and inform and inspire those disciples who are destined to become apostles and leaders of the Church. The garden encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is a profoundly healing experience between Creator and creature, redeemer and believer, male and female that harks back to the original complementarity and friendship of the first humans in the Garden of Eden, interrelating as God had intended.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the courageous pioneering role Mary Magdalene undertook as Apostle to the Apostles, the western Church has historically tended to emphasise more her role as repentant sinner.<sup>11</sup> There is a traditional understanding that the

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<sup>9</sup> Teresa Okure refutes the old notion that Jesus' instruction not to hold on to him is connected with avoiding an act of defilement on Mary's part. (Okure 2003:312)

<sup>10</sup> In his commentary on John's Gospel, Raymond Brown comments that some scholars have made this connection. (Brown 1970:1003) Adeline Fehribach refers to the garden motif. (Fehribach 1998:157)

<sup>11</sup> Beattie notes that the image of Mary Magdalene as preacher and disciple was still current in the Middle Ages, but that in the Roman Missal of 1570 she was designated as



unnamed woman mentioned in Luke 7:37-50, who washed and anointed Jesus' feet, is a prostitute, sister to Mary and Lazarus, and that she is Mary Magdalene; this, however, is not made explicit in the scriptures. Nevertheless, she has traditionally been regarded, as Esther de Boer puts it, as an 'attractive and very sinful woman, who thanks to Jesus was converted and repented'. (de Boer 1996:2) Her image has since inspired many contributions to art and literature and to social action, especially care of prostitutes.<sup>12</sup> De Boer describes her great popularity through history, but finds that interest was more in her sexuality than in her witness. (1996:2) Celebrated on her festival day (22 July) as the penitent, she embodied the call to conversion no matter how scarlet the sin. Biblical commentators seemed to be preoccupied with the idea that her healing was from a moral or sexual condition rather than a psychological one, although 'nowhere in the New Testament is demoniacal possession regarded as synonymous with sin'. (1996:14) She became associated with lust and temptation, vices generally associated with the feminine/female, and thus portrayed not so much as the prominent female disciple and friend of Christ but as a penitent whore, the type of contrite femininity.

The Church, losing sight of the community of equals founded by Jesus, thus called into question the sexuality of Mary and all women. (de Boer 1996: 122) Susan Haskins argues that by giving Mary Magdalene the role of redeemed whore and bestowing her with the image of the repentant, she is made 'a manageable, controllable figure, an effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex'. (Haskins 2005:96-97) Conflating her with other penitent female figures led to her 'metamorphosis into a composite character who represents womankind in the Christian tradition'. (2005:32)

I suggest that Mary Magdalene can indeed represent all women disciples, including women priests, but that a valid representation requires a shift in the traditional, androcentric and anti-feminist symbolism of some received wisdom. There has in the past few years been a surge in interest in the figure of Mary. Haskins notes this occurrence between the publication of the first and second editions of her book – that is, between 1993 and 2005. (2005:xv) She cites, for example, the stir caused by Norman Mailer's *Gospel According To The Son* (1997) in which Christ is tempted by the beautiful Mary. Recent interest has continued with Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2004) and the subsequent film. Yet the interest here remains in her sexuality rather than her apostolic calling. The penitent whore, in the phallogentric imagination, is more fascinating than the witness to spiritual truths. Through the male gaze, a woman is gauged by her sexuality rather than her spirituality. Male domination of the symbolic system refuses still to accept and respond to the enormous significance of Mary Magdalene's story, which remains subordinated to the still potent symbol of the repentant prostitute. Haskins regrets that she is still denied her active role in the ministry of the Church 'at a time when her modern counterparts are seeking their own role in the institution'. (2005:399) Modern scholarship, she argues, has

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'penitent' in the liturgy, and readings for her feast day included the story in Luke of the sinful woman anointing Jesus' feet. (Beattie 2002:71)

<sup>12</sup> She is often depicted in paintings holding a jar of ointment. Susan Haskins' book *Mary Magdalene: The Essential History* (2005) includes copies of many historical portraits of Mary Magdalene, often with the ointment jar, and as a repentant sinner.

revealed a character who, as a 'figure of independence, courage, action, faith and love', serves as a relevant and resonant symbol for many women following their calling within and outside the Church. (2005:400) It is the valiant witness, the courageous apostle who can symbolise Christian discipleship for women today, not least for those aspiring towards priesthood who, like Mary Magdalene, struggle to overcome a history of prejudice against their calling as women to represent the risen Christ.

In the light of the debate in relation to women and self-sacrifice, the figure of Mary Magdalene offers the archetype of a woman who has learned to take herself seriously, who knows that what she has to say is important. She is not overcome by the sloth which leads her to deny or ignore her own gifts and calling. Having (at least in legend) been dominated and abused by men, she finds through her relationship with Christ a way to come to herself as a whole, healed and valuable person who can give herself freely to and flourish in her new vocation. She has found her own subjectivity and language as a radically free human agent.

I have noted Irigaray's regret at the 'neglect [of] the genealogy of the woman, which has been collapsed inside the man's', (Irigaray 1993c:3) and her argument for symbol and language grounded in maternal images. I have mentioned also Beattie's criticism that Irigaray abstracts Christian symbols from their 'bodily significance in the context of a performative narrative of faith'. (Beattie 2006:96) As the first witness to the resurrection and as Apostle to the Apostles, Mary initiates that female genealogy which can now be continued through the ordination of women. The figure of Mary Magdalene, I suggest, offers an embodied model on which the woman priest can ground her vocation and ministry, particularly in terms of achieving subjectivity, valid discipleship and constructive self-sacrifice. She also offers a model for the woman priest in her role as representing the broader believing community.<sup>13</sup>

Adeline Fehribach suggests that the author of the fourth Gospel drew on contemporary literature and cultural convention to portray Jesus as messianic bridegroom who enables disciples to become the children of God. To this end, Mary Magdalene functions in the garden encounter as the symbolic bride who is representative of the wider faith community. (Fehribach 1998:145) Fehribach views this as a patriarchal device, where the male God weds the 'female' community, with its ancient associations of the woman/bride with unfaithfulness and defilement. A differently nuanced interpretation might, however, link Mary Magdalene as the symbolic bride with the fecundity of the feminine/female, and its theme of the fruitfulness of the entire Christian community through its relationship with Christ.

This image of Mary Magdalene surely offers a symbol of the Church as the Bride of Christ that allows women to have confidence in their own calling to discipleship, despite centuries of an oppressive androcentric fallacy that has taught them that by virtue of their corporeality, their physical function, they are inferior, excluded and ignored. Women can now celebrate that the Church is

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<sup>13</sup> In her contribution to *The Call For Women Bishops*, (2004) Beattie takes the figure of Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles, to support the ordination of women to the episcopate in order to fulfil the apostolic mission.

being challenged, as Lavinia Byrne says, with 'a radically new way of looking at the position of women before God; a radically new way of attending to the voice of believing women'. (Byrne 1988:9) Women can now claim: we are now able to accept ourselves as who we are, as daughters of a God who liberates us, who in our own right, through our particular experience, can legitimately take the news of the resurrection into the community. Byrne writes: 'the Church needs women to diversify and extend the place and purpose of apostolic presence in the world.' (Byrne 1983:96) As women work out their true vocations, shedding the constraints of an androcentric fallacy, new possibilities for personal and communal growth will emerge that will enrich the Church and the wider community. True to the example of Mary Magdalene, obedience to divine calling can lead women to genuine subjectivity and to fulfilment in effective ministry.

## CONCLUSION

In engagement with Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen, and drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theories of symbol and narrative, I have sought to develop a theology of women's priesthood through some of the main themes of the Christian narrative as they are disclosed in the Eucharistic Prayer. By examining the symbolism attached to the woman priest along the contours of sexuate identity and difference, I have been able to explore some meanings that have hitherto been occluded within the confines of a phallogocentric religious imaginary embodied in an exclusively male priesthood. In analysing the collision caused by the woman priest between the community's tradition and the continuing revelation that informs Christian identity, I have shown how new, transformative and liberating interpretations emerge from traditional narratives and symbols, particularly within the context of the Eucharist.

I have argued that the woman priest celebrating the Eucharist is a symbol that offers new and recovered meanings in the realm of the transcendent and that initiates social renewal in the invitation to decision and action. She provides fresh insights into the truth-value of the symbol of priesthood, allowing for a refiguration of the Christian narrative by juxtaposing ancient traditions and doctrines with new interpretations that call to be integrated into the identity and self-understanding of the individual and the community. Whereas the symbolism attached to the traditional all-male priesthood had become solidified by its gendered exclusivity, new interpretations emphasise unity in difference and diversity. If this unity is to be echoed in the Church, then it is essential that sexuate difference is acknowledged, so that women and men together may attain full subjectivity. The woman priest, I suggest, has a major role to play in such a cultural transformation, since she causes a shift in the interpretation of the symbol of priesthood and thus also of the faith narrative, so that ethical concerns are adjusted to adapt to new insights gained.

For a symbol to disclose its full meaning, however, it must be allowed to speak in order to be heard, appreciated and validly interpreted. In the case of women priests, I have shown that their entry into the androcentric institution of the Church has been problematic, not least in relation to lack of acceptance of their priesthood and to difficulties in working together with others in groups where male attitudes and behaviours are regarded as normative. The woman priest, I suggest, must be allowed by the institution to which she belongs to provide a symbol that is truly meaningful and transformative to the Church, particularly in relation to bringing both women and men to full personhood in *imago Dei*.

To fully realise the potential of such a symbol, however, the woman priest must be allowed and encouraged to be, to lead worship and to minister as a woman with a potential subjectivity and religious imaginary that are different from the male norm of masculinist discourse. She must be set free from any language or practice that discriminates against her sex, whether in terms of outright rejection of her ministry or in terms of subtle, even unconscious, discrimination within groups where male attitudes and behaviours have traditionally been normative. As the Church allows the woman priest to be herself, then she can truly provide a model for others to attain full subjectivity and to flourish as individuals and in relation to others. Thus can the woman priest provide a symbol of the trinitarian

Godhead that reflects new insights and unveils overlooked interpretations that will continue to be meaningful and valid for future generations of women and men, enabling them to discover manifestations of the divine in the Christian metanarrative.

I have shown that analysis of the tradition of Christian symbol and narrative through a feminist lens need not reject or veer away from observance of an orthodox Anglican faith. Rather, an encounter with the Gospel from such a perspective, whilst remaining critically faithful to the Christian tradition, breaks open new or previously overlooked refigurations. As the symbol and narrative of the liturgy engage with the worshipper, so these refigurations will arc from the 'text' of the liturgy to the life of the believing individual and community. In particular, for the purposes of this study, I have looked at how such refigurations become apparent, with the advent of women clergy, in the role of the priest who represents God and Christ to the Church and to the whole community, and who represents them before God and Christ. I trust that, by drawing on contemporary disciplines in the field of philosophy, psychology and sociology, especially with regard to sexual identity, I have pointed towards fresh analogical interpretations that become available when women as well as men preside at the Eucharist. I have attempted to develop an argument for a theology of women's priesthood within a liturgical context that has historically been developed and controlled within a masculinist environment. The current expansion of traditional language and ritual so as to reflect maternal aspects of the divine and women's ways of knowing is uncovering further possibilities for awareness of divine mystery. This excavation of the hidden feminine/female is happening with regard to worship that has traditionally been deeply gendered, and largely remains so.

My argument has been not for a neutralisation of gender within the sacramental but for an environment in which sexual difference is acknowledged and the feminine/female validated. Where the woman priest offers the possibility of more fluid gendered designations for the divine, then purely masculinist assumptions about women's sexuality, not least in scripture, are seen as a social construct and male hegemony is undermined. In this way a symbolic space is made available in which women will potentially achieve true subjectivity through and not despite their experience as members of the Body of Christ. Thus will women be able to aspire towards a divine horizon in accordance with their calling as people formed in *imago Dei*. Every woman will potentially be able confidently to claim that, as Letty Russell affirms,

in God's sight I am not marginal but...I came created by God and called by the biblical word of promise to become what God intends me to become: a partner in the mending of creation. (Russell 1985:139)

Where sexual difference is acknowledged, then the symbolic capacity of the woman priest becomes freighted with new possibilities. Ancient, polysemic symbols that have always been integral to the Christian metanarrative have to be heard again so that meanings emerge which are true and appropriate to our time and place, and freed from asymmetrical connotations of gender that ignore or devalue the feminine/female. From the basis of sexual difference, a theology of women's priesthood runs counter to any assumption of the paradigmatic status of the masculinist religious imaginary or of patriarchal structures and

practices. It offers an alternative way of knowing and being that is equally capable of mediating divine presence, thus modelling for all women an alterity to the dominant male religious imaginary which leaves women without speech. The woman priest, in mediating between body, language and the divine, can serve to bridge the hiatus between women's lives and their religion as it has been refigured over a long period within a male-dominated social, ecclesiastical and academic hierarchy. In representing a linguistic void, she can also bear symbolic value not only for other women but for all outsiders who exist in some form of otherness. She offers an embodied expression of all those whom a phallogocentric religion has forgotten, ignored or repressed.

Where sexual difference is recognised and the feminine/female validated, then full subjectivity for both women as well as men will be possible. This will occasion that divine fecundity between the sexes to which Luce Irigaray looks forward in the coming era of the spirit and the bride, when every woman has the chance to flourish in relation to the divine and to other people because she knows that she is truly a human person created in the image of God. In the vision described by the author of Revelation, the figure of the Church as the Bride of Christ wears fine linen woven from the 'righteous acts of the saints' (Rev 19:8). With respect to a theology of women's priesthood, the work of the saints that is woven into the bride's wedding linen entails the task of achieving full subjectivity for all people, women and men, through the recognition of sexual difference, so that all can find their true sexual identity in *imago Dei*.

With the presence of the woman priest, I suggest that the image of the bride can be rescued from the exclusively male imaginary and (to borrow from Ricoeur) can be 'demythologised' in order to recharge its truth-value as part of the virtuous circle of believing and understanding. Women's priesthood refutes a bride metaphor based on an assumption of feminine/female nontheomorphism and subordination, and confirms the paradigm of sexual difference. The whoredom associated with the redeemed bride now rests not with the inferiority and concupiscence attached essentially to the feminine/female but with the idolatry of the masculinist religious imaginary that has feared and suppressed otherness, devalued the feminine/female and ignored and denied sexual difference. A developing theology of women's priesthood can now be woven into the warp and weft of the Christian metanarrative whose message is open to all people without distinction.

Since, as Ricoeur's axiom has it, symbol gives rise to thought, then the woman priest as representative of both the divine and of the Body of Christ carries in her bodily presence a symbol of the triune God who is neither male nor female but in whom both women and men have their being. The woman priest models for all women their capability to be channels for speaking about and reflecting the divine in a way which upholds alterity to that of the male imaginary.

Irigaray anticipates the invitation of the spirit and the bride to the era of the wedding, which will take place when woman is transfigured through knowing she has a share of the spirit. (Irigaray 1993a:149) This will be possible only when humankind, like God, 'respects the difference between him and her'. (1993a:150) To this end, women must be redeemed from the idolatry of a masculinist religious imaginary that has burdened them with voicelessness. In practice, such a paradigmatic religious and cultural shift must entail women and

men living and working together in mutually supportive respect and collaboration. Within the Anglican church, the clergy have the opportunity to minister together, for the first time creating a space of gendered sacramentality that celebrates sexuate identity and honours the feminine/female in a way that has hitherto, in an all-male priesthood, been unattainable.

I argued earlier that, given Ricoeur's affirmation of the close association between symbol and ritual, the priest's role of ritual enactment during the Eucharist can be read as a narrative 'text' that opens up possibilities for the individual and for the community. Ritual is therefore a bridge that links narrative with ethics, and where there may be a collision, or dissonance, and a reconciliation needed, between what is said and seen in worship and what is done in everyday life. Where a woman priest presides, then the symbolism generated by her gender gives rise to thought about the nature of the triune God and the designations for the divine that are brought to speech. Where both men and women priests celebrate the Eucharist, then they together offer worshippers multiple and polysemic images which destabilise entrenched, male-dominated symbols and loosen the constrictions of traditional religious language. Together they represent a fluid interplay of symbols which enlarges the range of religious vocabulary. Such a fluidity in gender designations is not new; I have noted the medieval predilection for divine gender reversal, for instance with designations of Jesus as mother.<sup>1</sup> Representation of the gendering of the divine is never straightforward, and is open to a variety of configurations. Moreover, where time and place require, old symbols acquire new meanings where their operators find old ones inadequate or rebarbative.

Una Kroll, preaching in January 1997 at a Eucharist to mark the tenth anniversary of the ordination of the first women priests (including herself) in Wales, commented that:

We are seeing on our TV screens, in news reels, at public events like baptisms, weddings and funerals ordinary sinful women and men working alongside each other, contributing their ordinary gifts, making mistakes, bringing forth old and new treasures in heaven, ambassadors of Christ.

At a celebratory service, these were words of affirmation and of hope. Yet the vision of a fecund partnership pre-figuring the era of the wedding does not reflect the totality of the grounded experience of women priests in the Province of Wales, nor probably in others. During a conference at St Michael's Theological College, Cardiff, to reflect on the decade of women priests in Wales, I heard numerous accounts from dedicated female clergy of the problems they have faced in collaborating with male colleagues who themselves had difficulties in having to work alongside women. Joanna Penberthy, reporting on a previous conference where the issue of men and women clergy working together was raised, writes:

Women who have come from other fields of employment and are used to working alongside men can find the way they are treated within the church rather a rude awakening. The fact that as we discussed these problems, the women in the room could not begin to imagine how our male

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<sup>1</sup> See Bynum, Caroline Walker 1984 chapter 4; Beattie, Tina 2003 pp.193-197.

colleagues might react to the suggestion of gender equality awareness training points perhaps to the scale of the problem that the Church in Wales faces in normalizing the role of women within the ordained ministry. (Bayley 2006:16)

Palpably evident amongst those at the conference in Cardiff who had been among the first cohort of women ordained as priests in Wales in 1997 was the still lingering sense of pain and hurt, and the need for continued affirmation and support. No doubt such feelings exist also amongst some male clergy and lay women and men. Robin Greenwood, in the year in which the first women were priested in England, stated that:

we should be foolish not to expect acute anxiety and stress arising from the renewed understanding of women's authority in a church where men have for so long assumed the right to govern alone and where women have been largely defined as helpers and supporters. (Greenwood 1994:43)

Those who pioneered the way have carried an enormous weight of responsibility, not least in addressing the anxiety and stress caused by the priesting of women, and the reluctance, hesitancy or even outright opposition of some male clergy and laypeople. Those women who follow their pioneering colleagues have benefited from that struggle as women's priesthood becomes more accepted. The enriched symbolic possibilities attached to the woman priest brings with it an imperative for action and change. Women priests need to be conscious of their own rich symbolic charge if they are to promote a transformation in the religious imaginary that brings to birth women's full subjectivity.

I have noted the potential carried by the woman priest in bringing new interpretations to the narrative of faith, especially as it is expressed in liturgy. Women who are aware of these transformative possibilities are more likely to be able to take steps in the praxis of their ministry to making such possibilities a reality. My experience leads me to suggest that the woman priest who is conscious of the symbolic significance of both sexual difference in general and the (as yet largely unexplored) feminine/female in particular can potentially harness that awareness in renewing and revitalising the symbolism attached to the divine, to the priesthood and to the Church's understanding of itself as the Body of Christ. Yet it is questionable as to how aware the second generation is of the story of their older sisters' ground-breaking efforts, even over the last twenty or so years, let alone as far back as Maude Royden and the like. Jean Cornell, in an article on Anglican women priests, comments: 'Women clergy are surprisingly ignorant of the debt owed to Christian feminists and their role in the promotion of women's ordination', and declares that 'this needs to be remedied'. (Cornell 2003:43)

Those who have only recently become priests may well not be fully versed in the history and theology around the issue of women's ordination. And yet this later generation is the one which, having reserves of energy and youth not exhausted by the original struggle, must carry forward the vision for women's full recognition and subjectivity. To this end I suggest that all ordinands, as part of their ministerial training, should be made aware of the history and circumstances that have led to the eventual ordination of women, together with an introduction to the theology around the issue of women's priesthood. Without such an



awareness, they are less well equipped to address the challenges that I have described. To (mis)quote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: 'S/he who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth'.<sup>2</sup> The advent of the woman's voice in the sacred space initiates not an adjustment to the *status quo* but the promise (or threat) of radical, irreversible transformation. The responsibility of bringing to speech that silenced voice rests not least with the woman priest who, in opening up the symbolism around priesthood and the Eucharist, is on the cutting edge of a new understanding and experience of being Church.

Current efforts in gaining full acceptance of women in the Church are currently focussed in England and Wales on the episcopacy and the prospect of women bishops. I have argued that the female and male priest celebrating the Eucharist together embody the vision of full and equal humanity in which sexual difference is accepted in a way that rejects any dualistic hierarchy of men over women. Thus the Christian tenet that God is neither male nor female is embodied in liturgy and ministry. Yet this tenet cannot be fully symbolised or expressed until women are represented in all the ministries of the Church, including that of the episcopate. Whilst women are still denied this ministry, then feminist critiques of the Church will rightly claim that it remains a bastion of male domination, tightly controlled by a male clerical elite. Moreover, an episcopate open to women is likely to promote the flourishing of other women in their vocations. Canon Mary Stallard (writing as the question of women bishops is being explored in Wales) notes that women clergy she met in New York, where women bishops are accepted, seemed to be numerous, empowered and hopeful about the future. She wonders whether the presence of women bishops helps other American women to be 'more confident in exploring their vocation and in offering themselves in service in the diversity of Christian ordained ministries.' (Bayley 2006:6) Without an episcopate that embodies sexual difference, women who are called to ordination run the risk of being incorporated into what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls 'violent and abusive hierarchical situations of domination.' (Fiorenza 1998:40) Listening to other women priests' stories of struggle and pain (and aware of my own story), I do not think these words too strong or fanciful. Schussler Fiorenza recommends that:

feminist theologians and scholars in religion must...reconceptualise malestream theoretical frameworks, social-ecclesiastical structures, doctrinal ethical teachings and communicative-educational practices that are based entirely on the experiences and work of 'educated [Western Christian clergy]men'. (Fiorenza 1998:41)

Women priests need now to engage with the debate about episcopacy as a forum for exploring possibilities of radical structural change to an historically male-dominated institution. The model of work and leadership that might be offered by women bishops could be invaluable in supporting other women clergy working within structures and theologies developed to serve male-defined interests. Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis and Allison Stokes note that the need for such support is ever more crucial now because

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in by Jostein Gaarder (1995) *Sophie's World* p.137. Source unattributed.

denominations are still run on nonfeminist principles, and the more women participate in leadership, the more women will feel torn, conflicted and worn out. Working in an institution that does not truly believe in the full humanity of women and in justice as defined by women cannot be good for women's health. (Winter, Lummis & Stokes 1995:206)

The aim in this study is not to replace a male hegemony with a female one. Feminist theology has critiqued the false universalism of the masculinist religious imaginary and of an androcentric mode of thinking. This theology of women's priesthood does not privilege gynocentric thinking and women's experience. It has no desire to valorize the feminine/female over and against the masculine/male in a way that would reproduce the androcentric symbolic construction of male-female gender polarity that characterises patriarchy. Rather, it calls for harmonious partnership and respect between the sexes, as expressed in Irigaray's vision of the wedding between the spirit and the bride, who 'invite beyond genealogical destiny to the era of the wedding and the festival of the world.' (Irigaray 1984:149) This image of a God-given male-female bond is one that the Church, represented by male and female priests celebrating together, can effectively symbolise, both in the Eucharist and in day-to-day ministry. As Morny Joy comment, 'Irigaray is not asking us to analyse her new order, but to live it'.(1998:265)

In January 2007 I attended a Eucharist at Llandaff Cathedral to mark the tenth anniversary of the ordination of women priests in Wales. The celebrant was Bishop Christina Ofenberg of the Lund Diocese, Sweden. At the close of the service, as a band played 'We Are Marching In The Light Of God', Bishop Christina joined hands with the Bishop of Bangor, Rt Revd Tony Crockett, and they danced together up the central aisle. I think that the image of those two bishops, moving in mutual esteem and harmony, sums up much of my contribution in this study towards a developing theology of women's priesthood.



Right Reverend Christina Odenberg, Bishop of the Lund Diocese, Sweden and  
Right Reverend Tony Crockett, Bishop of Bangor, Wales

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