



‘And a sword will pierce your soul also’: reflections on the holy mother and the holy child

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This article explores themes of maternal purification and the separation of mother and child through close attention to the presentation narratives in Luke 2. It draws upon cultural theory, artistic representations of the narratives and theological reflection upon experience to address the ambiguities of the maternal relation. It suggests that a recovery of this ambiguity is a necessary not only for understanding this particular biblical event but also our relations with the divine.

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Purification and presentation

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'.¹

When 40 days were over Mary went with Joseph and the baby to the Temple for her purification after childbirth. Here, being poor, she offered what was required of the poor. Two young birds to be sacrificed. And in her arms another offering, her firstborn son to be dedicated to God and redeemed as the law required. Anna and Simeon were witnesses. Simeon offered an ecstatic blessing, but it was a bitter blessing also.

'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'²

Anna too prophesied as the blood ran and smoke rose; as the blade fell, separating mother and child.

Sacrifice and separation

The purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus at the Temple are joined together in our imaginings and our devotions into one event of beating wings and fateful words. We celebrate it as Candlemas,³ which sounds both bright and simple. When I was younger I thought, in my innocence, that Mary's doves fluttered free that day – the sacrificial gesture of this important moment being their kind release. I know now that this was not the case. What was happening was older and darker and more dangerous than that. In what follows I will reflect upon this particularly 'bodily' narrative using insights from cultural theory, artistic representations of the scene and, most particularly, my own experiences of maternal bindings and separations.

Mary Douglas has helped us to understand the primeval roots of purity rituals and how they establish holy order in chaotic circumstances through the enforcing of proper boundaries. To be pure is to be entire, whole and separate.⁴

What is impure is that which is out of place, adulterated or overflows its proper limits and contaminates the discreteness of another. Blood flowing from the place of birth is dangerous. Do not mix life and death. Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk. This is an abomination. Regulate the body and the society will also maintain coherence. Julia Kristeva goes further.⁵ Our horror of impurity is tied to the need to become separate from the mother. This has to happen if the most archaic and awful flooding of the self by the other is to be avoided. Religion is elaborated around the necessity of a cutting apart. It sanctions it and makes it sacred. What begins in the body becomes the cultural order.

So Mary stands in the Temple with her child. She has reached the end of the period of deep intermingling. A time apart when the blood of childbirth still seeps and the birthing separation is not yet complete. It is a longed-for and dreaded moment.

In Aert de Gelder's famous image,⁶ Simeon, with all the tender gestures of a midwife, takes the babe in his arms and raises up to God a child wrapped all in white. But a red cloth around the babe's middle still bleeds into the picture the sign of an umbilical wound. Mary, praying, recedes into the darkness as a new sacred order is established.

In a contemporary image by Andrey Mironov,⁷ Simeon assumes maternal gestures. Upon his shoulder is draped the familiar white cloth of a nursing mother and this extends to wrap around the child. Mary is pictured here as a figure in deepest red. Once again she moves into the background, her face profoundly sad and yet accepting of her necessary 'purification' and her loss.

Rending and sewing

This matter of the separation of the mother and the child is not a simple one. It takes both a bodily and a historical form, and for the majority of women in the world there are few options in the social regulation of this process. Cultural and economic forces dictate the forms of intimate relations. However, *some* women have been confronted with *some* choices. In the roistering tales of Empire days, stalwart colonial wives often separated from their children to be with their husbands. These husbands were explorers or governors, soldiers or missionaries, civil servants and engineers. The children were left in cold schools or in the attics of their aunties. They waited in April rain to hear news from the far places where their mothers lay dreaming, in fine conjugal mosquito nets. A bit too hot perhaps but apparently not desolate for their babies.

A hundred years on and women left *both* children *and* lovers because they had to follow their own selves. I was sat on the train opposite such a nice woman and she said that he was actually the most maternal one and so it had been the obvious decision that Merlin, it was a girl Merlin not a boy one, should stay with him. And she said that it was a choice that she had never regretted making. Although sometimes she did feel sad about it. Particularly when she was in a shoe shop and she found herself picking up the little shoes. I did not ask her how she stopped picturing the soft pads of tiny feet and how they arch into new moons when you stroke them.

The times have changed again now. By the time I came to give birth the intense and intimate binding of mother and child had been revalued. It had become commonplace to perform a small, routine procedure before the delivery of the placenta. It is virtually painless. They sew the babies into our souls using two inches of the umbilical cord.

The stitches hold as tight as ever even after all these years. But this is not entirely a healthy suturing.

Too tightly bound

It was a late Saturday afternoon. I was lying in bed because I had an ear infection and I was exhausted and it was February and I was being bullied at work. I had the radio on beside me and I did register that it was telling an appalling story of instances of Nazi violence – murders that occurred on the streets rather than out of sight in a wood or at the end of a rail track. I thought I should turn it off because I was not attending carefully enough. But that seemed disrespectful so I kept it on. I thought I ought to listen but a sleepy warmth was beginning to lull me. Then I was wrenched wide-awake again. I was forced to hear how in one small town a mother and her days-old baby were rolled in the carpet from their own living room floor and burned to death in the road. I could imagine the patterned carpet with grainy dust in its fibres and cords showing in the places where it had worn and frayed. I could smell the choking smoke before the flames took hold.

I cried and cried and could not stop crying. It was the brutal horror of it of course. But mixed up with this another strong feeling. A sense of the appropriateness of their being bundled and bound together at the end. If they came for me I knew I would want to take her with me. If they came for her I would want to go as well. The separation would be more awful. And then I was

wondering at what stage should these feelings become less intense? At what point would I not choose the burning embrace? There must come a time at which you are able to say to the little child, 'Run! Now! Get Out' and you turn to face them while she makes her escape. I expected there must come that time but I had not reached it. I knew I would have plucked the baby from the cradle as they knocked on the door. Held her close to me while they smashed the furniture and tore the carpet from the floor. And I had to admit that in the midst of my fear, as they made a pyre of my home, that I would be glad my baby was in my arms. What a terrible feeling is this?

Gladly letting go

So strange also to have such dark thoughts about the utter impossibility of separation when in actual fact at that moment she was not with me. I had waved her goodbye quite cheerfully more than an hour before. My friend had borrowed our car seat and sat her next to her own child in the back of her car. The two of them were eating apple slices as she drove away and I was so glad to see them go. So glad. Also I had never had problems about taking her to the nursery when I went back to work. In fact I loved the nursery.

I had taken a lot of time to choose the right one. Visiting nurseries was a good thing to do in the days when she was very little and I was still really the only thing she needed. I had a list. The first place I visited was run by the council and had a very high reputation. The woman I spoke to on the phone was a little reserved, my accent I think, but said I could come and look around. It was wonderful. A little world. There was a small kitchen, stocked with miniature plates and dishes. The main room was set out with tiny tables and chairs. There were small easels for baby artists, clay bins and a book corner. I saw the children eat their lunch and watched as little mattresses and soft striped blankets were brought out and the babies fell asleep in neat rows. Bob Marley, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X looked down from the walls in dignified blessing. I felt like oversized Alice in a wonderland with attitude.

'So how long would my daughter have to wait before a place might be available at the Marcus Garvey Nursery?'

'We have a waiting list and a points system.'

'So how old do you think she would be before something came up.'

'About 37.'

I tried the other end of the spectrum. The Princess Royal Nursery and Academy. A place where young women with streaked blond hair, brown uniforms and posh voices were trained to look after children. I felt the babies here were mainly employed for educational purposes. They could have been replaced by those life-like rubber dolls. And it was not the colourful little toy town I had seen and set my heart on. If a baby was tired or fell asleep it would just be removed by a uniformed teenager into one of a line of anonymous white cots at the side of the room. This is one of the things I disliked the most. The idea that she would just be put in any old cot not snuggled into her own little nest or planted in a neat flowerbed of babies.

I rejected the Montessori nursery because it was headed by a mad woman dressed in yards of beige knitting who talked about over-stimulating our children with colours and encouraged me to paint our living room green and get rid of all the plastic toys. It was already green but I did not tell her. I also crossed off the list the nursery next to the station for the opposite reason. Little Chuffers looked exactly like a branch of MacDonald's. The staff wore similar nylon uniforms with little hats and name badges with stars. The thought of dropping off your child and catching the train five minutes later, briefcase in hand and unencumbered, seemed just that bit too convenient.

In the end I chose the university nursery. In this place I was glad to see that each baby had her own neatly labelled little bed in a dim anteroom hung with moons and planets and shooting stars. Although clearly reserved for the cultural elite the nursery also had an atmosphere of progressive internationalism. Despite being located in some dodgy backstreets, once inside you could imagine yourself transported into an era and environment in which collective childcare was (rightly) viewed as a means to create a better world. On the walls were posters about respecting diversity and the rights of the child. All the festivals were kept. Each one with feasting and flimsy cards home covered in glitter and baby finger marks. I still have most of the cards:

'Dear Mummy and Daddy, Today we celebrate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death. We contemplate our own deaths, karma and rebirth and the nature of suffering and desire.'

'Dear Mummy and Daddy, Today is World Aids Day and we celebrate the courage of children all over the world who are HIV positive.'

'And a sword will pierce your soul also'

'Dear Mummy and Daddy, Today is International Women's Day and we must all remember the struggle of women to achieve equality, dignity and human rights' [... and decent nurseries].

Yes baby! Take your own tiny steps now into this bright and challenging world. Little sweetheart pioneer.

The precious gift

The delegation I was on travelled in our delegation minibus to visit a nursery just outside Hang Zhou. I was enjoying this part of the trip. The tea museum in Two Peaks Park with its tall trees and flowing streams, the giant pagoda, the Buddhist Temple where I saw a single white camellia in the courtyard – it was perfection; a sight that I will never forget. And now the compulsory lectures on the virtues of communism and the showcasing of this jewel of collective childcare. I was entranced. In love. It wasn't the impressive monuments and it certainly was not the propaganda. It was something in the air, in the mist around the hills, steaming dumplings on the breakfast stalls, the melancholy night horns of boats upon the long river. The others in my party seemed immune to such infatuations. They thought that it would be much better if our guides abandoned the official tour schedule and let us meet more Christians, visit more churches, talk more about theological education.

I could see where they were coming from of course. Obviously. We had travelled a long way to do just that. But this was my point also – we had come a very long way and this was not only to enable us to meet theological educators but to begin to appreciate the compelling fascination, the violence and the beauty of this overwhelming place. So, although I knew that what we were being shown was the model nursery picked out for such visits, I was also very glad just to sit there with the children. To see the little clouds their warm breath made as they shouted to each other across the playground. To watch them in their knitted woollen pixie hoods and little padded cotton jackets playing in the garden. To hold the cold little hands placed in mine and communicate with them in the babbling tongues of mutual incomprehension.

'These are the precious children,' said the guide, wistfully I thought, 'all the children at this nursery are from one-child families.'

I know, I knew, what this meant. I knew that this enforced policy meant frustrated longings and loss and even worse. I was aware of the abortions and

the sacrifices that so often happened in secret when the firstborn child carried the misfortune of being a girl.

But there is another story that I should also tell at this point. One of the pastors who acted as guide to our party carried a picture of her little daughter everywhere and talked about her all the time. But she was fiercely unsentimental about the fact that procreation was now behind her. As we sat together on the backseat of the minibus travelling back from a country church late one night she said:

I am glad that she has been born and I am glad that I am her mother and I am glad that she is the one and only and, even more, I am glad that I can be a minister. There is not room for this love I have for God and for any more babies.

What is mothering?

I have often reflected upon what mothering is really about. As a matter of simple observation it could be understood as the bodily labour of carrying large, heavy objects from one place to another. A sleeping toddler. A bag of shopping: fruit, milk, nappies, orange juice. Armfuls of toys, a bicycle, baskets of washing. But although it helps if you are reasonably fit, all that lifting and carrying is really only the crudest performance of maternal gathering and putting asunder.

To remain for a while at the level of objects. If all the toys, all the clothes, all the pictures brought home were saved then the child would be smothered under the weight of them. But of course they would never consent to part with an old comic book, a lilac pony with a lime green mane, a witch's cloak. So it is the mother who has to pass sentence on these sacred objects still infused with the life the child has given them. The child has to grow and so they have to die. It is very hard when what is past is precious and what is to come is unknown. But you have to do it and in secret. It is a model massacre of innocents.

We can go deeper and beyond this level to the place where real sacrifice takes place. The child will not stay still. It draws from the mother ever new bindings and new lettings go. Every stage both a new birth and a bereavement. It is almost too much to bear. Hélène Cixous describes the maternal as a womb/tomb. Motherloving links life and death together inextricably and from

the very beginning: 'as soon as I love, death is there, it camps out right in the middle of my body ... getting mixed up with my food.'⁸

In another exploration of this same theme, Sylvia Plath takes us to a hospital ward and introduces us to three women. One is giving birth to a beloved child and is being swept away by a full tide of joy and pain: 'There is no miracle more cruel ... It milks my life.'⁹ Another is losing a longed-for baby and describes this bleeding loss, 'I am a garden of black and red agonies.'¹⁰ The third woman is putting up a baby for adoption. She has decided to tear herself away from this small life that clings to her, 'I am a wound walking out ... I leave someone who would adhere to me.'¹¹ As the poem unfolds and the voices intertwine we realise that all of them are speaking together about the intense ambiguities of mothering. We live with its intolerable flooding of our boundaries. It is no wonder that part of us longs for purification and an end to the turmoil and the chaos.

Anna in the Temple

Where this reflection began was at Candlemas – the event of purification and presentation, which, in art and devotion, is predominantly represented in a manner that moves both the holy child and the holy mother away from the chaos of the carnal. Simeon takes the child into his own arms. The Mary who receives him back knows that she is not the same mother who entered the Temple, having now been purified. The child is not the same child, having been offered, as required. So has a painful but necessary transaction been made whereby the child is now on a trajectory away from the bodily, amorphous, underwater love-world of the mother and is entering the definite and defined and 'pure' world of God and father and the father's law?

I think it is more complicated than that.

I am interested that in the two art works I described Simeon seems to be fittingly represented with a feminine aspect. To have the baby entirely removed from the maternal is neither artistically nor spiritually tolerable to us. Art has long been able to represent what until very recently theology could not articulate. That the maternal is ineradicable in the divine economy. Despite our desires. Despite our rituals. Despite our cleansings and our mechanisms of sacrifice.

To stay with art a little longer ... and also to bring Anna back into the frame.

There is a picture that fascinates me, titled *The Prophetess Anna in the Temple*. It has been attributed to Rembrandt but there may be reasons to doubt this attribution – although its off-centre religious perspective certainly joins it to other challenging works by the same artist. In the picture, unusually, Anna dominates the foreground. She is surrounded by the tablets of the law and we can glimpse the figures of cherubim that place her in the Temple. To confirm this location but to the side (and very far to the side) we can glimpse the presentation drama taking place. Simeon holds and blesses the baby. Mary is there. Joseph too and some other shadowy figures. But Anna takes centre stage and, leaning very close into her lap, is the figure of a lovely child. A child who is in prayer. The two figures are interjoined and portrayed in a peaceful and intimate reverie while other things take place – elsewhere.

There has been speculation as to why this image of a woman and an unknown child should figure as a representation of Anna. Interestingly the picture was ‘misidentified’ early in its artistic journey as representation of Hannah dedicating her firstborn son Samuel to God. A ‘slip’ that is not entirely erroneous as the presentation narrative in Luke recalls this older story. It has also been viewed as an image of the painter and his own mother. And this relationship may have served as inspiration although the child is very young and the mother is very old. None of these interpretations overrides the radical impact of a deep bond between woman and child that is solemn and holy and central to this unconventional marking of the presentation narrative.

I think this image stands as a challenge to theology. A challenge that we recognise two interrelated truths.

The first is that just as in human/bodily relations so in our relation with the divine there is an overwhelming and chaotic element that calls forth rituals of both separation and purification but is intensified rather than appeased by their performance. They are salves that keep the wound open. Second, that we mediate desires for theological ‘innocence’ by recognising that purification processes themselves contain forms of sacrificial violence that require mediation by the reinscription of the feminine. In the case of the presentation narratives this saves them from the overwhelming terror we experience as Abraham stands over Isaac – although we are aware the stories are not unrelated. Rembrandt’s image of Anna the prophetess places the presentation in the dark, chaotic and unregulated edges of the picture while its peaceful centre is held by a holy image of a woman and child. In this matter of the mother and the child, the body and the mystery – and God – there will always

be pain, excess and danger but also a heart of ineffable bliss. Cixous describes this so well. Such loving, she writes, 'is dreadful. As dreadful and desirable as God.'¹²

Notes

1. Luke 2:22–24.
2. Luke 2:34–35.
3. Traditionally the end of the nativity season. This last 'epiphany' is also the occasion for the blessing of candles to be used in the coming year's services.
4. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge, 1966.
5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
6. *Simeon's Song of Praise* was painted c. 1700. De Gelder was a pupil of Rembrandt and his work owes much to the influence of his teacher.
7. *St Simeon and the Christ Child*.
8. Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 86.
9. Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', in S. Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, London: Faber and Faber, 1981, pp. 176–187, p.180.
10. 'Three Women', p. 180.
11. 'Three Women', p. 184.
12. Hélène Cixous, in Hélène Cixous and Mirielle Gruber, *Hélène Cixous Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 113.

