

# *Melting Hearts of Stone*

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*Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
(W.B. Yeats: 'Easter 1916')*

## **Introduction**

Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote the above lines in the wake of the devastation of the First World War, and following the deaths of former friends and acquaintances executed by the British after the Irish Easter Rising of 1916. In the last thirty-five years of civil conflict in Ireland, the verse has often been repeated. But now on the world stage the discourse of sacrifice enjoys a new uncritical hegemony as it legitimizes both the war on terror, as well as the actions of those designated as 'terrorists'. The call of Jesus (and the prophets of most religious traditions), 'I desire mercy not sacrifice', has been ignored.

Westerners have lived in what philosopher Julia Kristeva<sup>1</sup> calls a 'sacrificial social order' in which scapegoats are continually fabricated as sacrificial victims. Given this history, and its effects on women, in particular, post-modernists need to return to those religious sources silenced, crushed (or canonized – the same thing) by the dominant authorities.

Post-modern theorists could do worse than to return to the prophetic injunction, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'. Uttered by the Hebrew prophets, by Jesus and many saints who followed in his name, and echoed by the prophets of other religious traditions, this injunction has been largely

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva, J. (1986), 'Woman's time', in Tori Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 187-213

ignored by the dominant religions, except in a form in which *mercy* served to clean up the excesses of unbridled sacrifice.

Whereas sacrifice serves to legitimize male hegemony in the public world; *mercy* is effeminized, privatized, and serves to protect the purveyors of sacrifice (and their victims) from the worst effects.<sup>2</sup>

Sacrifice is a feminist issue, and this essay continues the work of those feminist theologians who critique the effects of the Christian sacrificial legacy.<sup>3</sup> It clearly distinguishes between self-sacrifice and mercy, and seeks to highlight the potential of ‘mercy’ in developing horizons for post-modernist religious interrogations.

This essay will address the following questions: Why is the question of sacrifice so important? What is the difference between sacrifice and mercy? Theoretically and practically, how do we begin to put mercy rather than sacrifice at the heart of cultural and religious practice?

## **Religion and Post-Modernism**

Heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and by materialist philosophies, critics of religion have traditionally called for rationality to replace religious illusion. They assumed that knowledge

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<sup>2</sup> Jay, Nancy (1992), *Throughout your generations forever: Sacrifice, religion, and paternity*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press;

Marvin Carolyn, David Ingle 1999, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Joanne Carlson and Carole R. Bohn, (1989) *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, New York: Pilgrim Press

would lead, if not to virtue, at least to choice. In the 1970s, even theologians cried out that ‘God is dead’ without knowing who or what might take His place.

In recent years, however, a post-modernist return to religion has occurred, partly in response to increased awareness that traditional religions hold no monopoly on totalitarianism, reification, hegemony or violence. Furthermore, new forms of communal life (Nazism, Maoism, Remembrance Days) have emerged where militarist rather than religious icons dominate the landscape.

Some post-modernists (especially those influenced by Jacques Lacan) look anew to religion, given its power to disrupt totalitarian ideologies through hysterical eruptions or to promote counter-cultural or even transgressive practices. However, given the traditional exclusion of women from those religions legitimated by sacrifice, feminist post-modernists must approach western religion with new and gendered eyes, and not be dazzled by, or conflate its contemporary manifestations (in Rome or Canterbury) with, religion itself.

Post-modernists locate the enduring power of religion in deeply rooted strategies that offer mythological or ritual solutions for the management of psychic distress.<sup>4</sup> Such strategies are often carved out to serve the interests of social, gendered or economic power. One of their concerns is to analyze the roots of social trauma that traditional religion might have sublimated,

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<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, Julia (1987), *Tales of Love* (trans. by Leon Roudiez), New York: Columbia University Press  
Kristeva, Julia, (1987), *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, introd. by Otto F. Kernberg), New York: Columbia University Press

repressed or contained, and to demystify the hidden agendas that masquerade behind ostensibly spiritual language.

They might argue, for instance, that stories like the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis are true, not in a scientific sense, but because they encapsulate the pain of separation from the mother's body, the Garden of Paradise. Such stories, as I have argued in a previous work,<sup>5</sup> were formulated when Judaism was making a transition from a society centred around the mother, to one centred around the father, warriors and the king, in what Joseph Campbell refers to as 'The Great Reversal'.<sup>6</sup> In the hands of powerful religious officinaries, such mythological accounts of origins became concretized, ontologized and petrified.

One discourse, in particular, that of redemption, has dominated western Christianity. Redemption narratives form the basis for elaborate theologies of atonement and sacrifice that underpin the power structures of both the high Church and fundamentalist Christianity. However, in the secular world redemption narratives also hold sway. For nearly two thousand years, Christianity dominated religious theologies and practices in the western world, but now the cross that once stood in the middle of every European village in homage to Christ who died for all – the *sacrifice to end all sacrifices* – has effectively been replaced by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier who gave his life for all in the *war to end all wars*.

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<sup>5</sup> Condren, Mary (1989), *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*, San Francisco: Harper & Row

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, Joseph, (1962), *Oriental Mythology: The Masks of God*, Middlesex: England p. 36

Where once, for instance, the authority of the Holy Roman Empire underpinned the authority structures of national and political leaders, now, according to René Girard:

The bomb does seem indeed like a prince of this world, enthroned above a host of priests and worshippers, who exist, so it would seem, only to do it service. Some of them bury poisoned eggs of the idol beneath the earth; others deposit them at the bottom of the seas; yet others sprinkle the heavens with them, causing the stars of death to revolve endlessly above the teeming ant heap. No slightest section of nature – now that science has cleansed it of all the ancient projections of the supernatural – has not been reinvested with the truth of violence. But this time we cannot pretend that the power for destruction is anything but human, even though it works in ways that parallel the working of the sacred.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of the nuclear threat to human life and the natural earth, Girard argues that mythical consciousness must now be replaced by a profound awareness of the political effects of myths. Unconsciousness, or innocence, is a luxury the human race can no longer afford. In the words of Sheila Devaney: ‘Not an ontology of truth, but a politics of truth is what is demanded today.’<sup>8</sup>

The post-modernist return to religion, therefore, is to be welcomed, bringing, as it will, the most sophisticated tools of analysis to bear on the intractable dilemmas of our time. However, and despite Aristotle, theorists often assume a relatively untroubled path from knowledge to virtue. Therefore, of great importance would be the concentration on those performative and disciplinary practices (rituals, meditations, prayers) that traditionally comprise religion and, arguably, play as great a role in shaping the social order as any belief systems.

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<sup>7</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> Sheila Greeve Devaney (1987), ‘Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations’, in Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, Mary Ellen Ross (eds), *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 84

## **The Discourse of Sacrifice**

While it is commonplace among some Churches to say that they reject sacrifice, anti-sacrificial discourse often camouflages its continuity. The Protestant Reformation challenged the degradation that had set in to the Roman Catholic Church by its control of the economy of sacrifice. Clerical corruption, the sale of indulgences, monopolies of power had been widespread. But the Protestant Reformation (with the exception of some radical sects) left unchallenged the economy or logic of sacrifice insofar as it merely appropriated the power of sacrifice to itself – often in the interests of the new European nation states. Far from repudiating sacrifice, Eurocentric post-Christian societies have simply devised their own militarist versions.

Sacrificial ideologies have run riot on every side in western thinking, spiritualities and practices. The poppy fields of France and Belgium, the Nazi extermination camps, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Korea, Vietnam, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and the threat of nuclear destruction stand in stark contrast to the great technological achievements of the twentieth century. In my own Irish context, over three thousand women, men and children have been killed, mostly by near neighbours, in wars of paramilitary violence during the past thirty-five years in Northern Ireland. Thousands more have been left permanently maimed, orphaned and widowed. Religious themes have permeated the conflict.

Some would like to think that the dynamics of sacrifice would not hold sway in a post-Christian society. But one has only to examine the logic that underpins warrior discourse to see otherwise. Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote:

I do not know the meaning of the universe. But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt . . . that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.<sup>9</sup>

The commentator John Nef remarks:

It was the sacrifice, not the cause which Holmes glorified . . . In an earlier Memorial Day address of 1884, he had made plain that he regarded the sacrifice made by the southern soldiers as no less sacred than that made by the northern.<sup>10</sup>

New dramas of sacrifice, atonement, and redemption are being played out before our eyes: old theological controversies take on a lethal significance. Unless ways are found to deconstruct the apparatus of sacrifice, its underlying pattern will be uncritically recreated. In this nuclear age, as Albert Einstein once commented: ‘Everything has changed except our way of thinking.’

Theology once might have asked why God permits such evil. But recent work on the mechanisms and mindsets of sacrifice firmly places the responsibility for most destructive ideologies and practices back onto the human community. As Girard has observed: ‘Absolute vengeance, formerly the prerogative of the gods, now returns, precisely weighed and calibrated, on the wings of science.’<sup>11</sup>

How is it that the Christian revolution, that started out so promisingly two thousand years ago, appears (in all but name) to have ground to a halt?

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Nef, J.V. (1950), *War and Human Progress*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 406

<sup>10</sup> Nef, *War and Human Progress* p. 406

<sup>11</sup> Girard, René. (1977), *Violence and the Sacred*. trans. by Patrick Gregory, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press. Orig. *La Violence et le sacré*, Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1972, p. 140

In this article I am confining my understanding and analysis of sacrifice to the Eurocentric culture with which I am familiar: I do not attempt to generalize beyond those confines. In addition, the focus is not on the practices of sacrifice which differ widely throughout the world, but on the discourse of sacrifice operative in the western religious and political world. I do this for several reasons.

Although many writers use the word sacrifice as though there is agreement as to its meaning, definitions of sacrifice are often circular, contextual, or self-serving. Anthropologist of religion, Nancy Jay, provides a history of attempts to define sacrifice but concludes: 'To bring "sacrifice" under our control as a perfectly defined object of analysis, to cut out and classify its constituent elements, is more like doing sacrifice than understanding it.'<sup>12</sup>

One of the difficulties with the term 'sacrifice' is its multivalent and slippery usage. The word can refer to the Christian God's sacrifice of His only son to redeem the world, a sacred offering to various deities, as well as the sacrifice of oneself for family, friend or nation.

In reality, the word chosen should be *choose*. 'I choose to do *this*, rather than *that*'. In the public world those who use the word *sacrifice* rather than *choose* often do so in order to take the high moral ground or to establish the power structures in the post-sacrificial religious or political order. It is important, therefore, to interrogate what kinds of things sacrifice *does* in the public world.

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<sup>12</sup> Jay, Nancy (1992), *Throughout your generations forever: Sacrifice, religion, and paternity*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, pp. xxv-xxvi.

# What Sacrifice Does

## Creating the Enemy

Some post-modernists<sup>13</sup> argue that (at least in western society) we come to consciousness only in relation to what is perceived as 'Other' in the process of distinguishing between ourselves and those around us. Othering might be endemic to human consciousness, and sacrifice may be its culturally elaborated form.

However, what is most threatening to the established order is difference that exposes the precariousness of identity. Vatican statements are always valuable for the unapologetic evidence they offer of the mentality of the sacrificial social order. A statement on homosexuality declared as follows:

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.<sup>14</sup>

Following on from the language of the first statement, the second is a *non sequitur*. Nevertheless, the difference represented by homosexuals, like gypsies, political refugees, Blacks, foreigners and strangers cannot be tolerated in a sacrificial social order charged with separating the

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<sup>13</sup> Saussure, Ferdinand de, (1959:1974) *Course in General Linguistics*, London: Fontana Collins; Derrida, Jacques, (1978) *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Jay, Nancy, (1981), 'Gender and Dichotomy', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 38-56.

<sup>14</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Persona Humana Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics*. December 29th 1975, p.4

unconscious and conscious, rational and irrational, abject and pure. Homosexual identities are fluid, or liminal, so they threaten the rigid boundaries of communities where sacrificially achieved distinctions are maintained.

## **Sacrifice and abjection**

We also repudiate parts of ourselves that we consider to be 'abject'. In western societies, especially those that repudiate matri-centred social systems or symbols, abjection often centres on reminders of the maternal body – blood, urine, faeces, milk. Keeping the abject at bay is a life-long process: the toiletry industry thrives on its eradication.

According to Elizabeth Grosz, the 'abject' is the symbol of what is rejected, concealed or contained in order to maintain order:

The abject is what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality – those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable. The abject attests to the impossibility of clear borders, lines of demarcation or divisions between the proper and the improper, the clean and the unclean, order and disorder as required by the symbolic. Symbolic relations separate the subject from the abyss that haunts and terrifies it.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth (1989), *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Wellington, London, Boston: Allen and Unwin, p. 73

Repudiating the abject becomes synonymous with independence. But abjection is all around us and we project our fears of losing independence onto Others. We also persecute those Others, lest whatever they represent re-infect our own psyche or the assumed purity of our social order.

Once we have excluded and rejected parts of ourselves we recognize such parts in Others and persecute them, lest their abjection re-infect our own psyche or the purity of our social or psychic order. In Jungian terms the 'Other' is our Shadow, the negative side of ourselves that haunts us as we go about our daily business. Meeting strangers, or foreigners, especially outside the context of clean, plush, and disinfected hotels, raises up our old fears: Will they re-infect us?

Whatever is defined as 'Other' is a cultural construct that serves the interests of power.

Distinctions of caste, class and race reinforce cultural ideals based upon maintaining separations.

In the western world, the White, wealthy heterosexual male represents the cultural ideal.

Although few can aspire to all the terms of this ideal, those on the lower end of the hierarchy derive enough benefits to maintain and defend its reified categories. On this scale, poor White ignorant men are considered superior to rich, Black, cultured women.

One of the effects of repudiating abjection is that it promotes oppositional logic: the logic of I/ and Not/I. When I was growing up in Ireland, we did not have Catholics and Protestants, we had Catholics and Non-Catholics. In America there are Whites and Non-Whites. In western history the Not/I has historically been women, the poor and other races. It is a simple matter to turn the Other into an enemy.

We seldom accomplish the work of repudiating abjection or othering in isolation: group solidarity is crucial. In addition, the social order needs regular rejuvenation through rituals, parades, symbols and myths that provide social affirmation, group-thinking, and theatres of communal action that continually separate the clean from the unclean, culture from nature. This is where the public religious rites come into play.

Ritual activities often include a non-verbal, often unconscious, grammar of social stratification. The elevated positions of the celebrants, the question of who may or may not wear uniforms, robes or costumes, the provision of special seating for the rich, and the separation of male and female are as much a part of the language of ritual as any underlying stories or mythologies (Jay, 1992). Such unconscious strategies reinforce the structures of power, separating the I/ from the Not/I.

Likewise, public rituals offer communal affirmation that legitimize the horrors and atrocities of war while concealing the hidden agendas of power. As David Tracy has argued: 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.'<sup>16</sup>

## **Sacrifice and Festival**

In western society, war rather than religion now functions as a political rite of legitimation and as the main theatre for abjecting the 'Other'. A time of war in many communities is often equivalent to a type of festival in which the normal rules governing human behaviour are

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<sup>16</sup> Tracy, David (1987), *Plurality and ambiguity: hermeneutics, religion, hope*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 85

temporarily lifted, making possible unthinkable acts.<sup>17</sup> The world is turned upside down. The beggar becomes king. Differences of class, status or position can be collapsed and a new status temporarily achieved. Legitimacy is conferred upon deeds otherwise considered to be atrocities: rape and murder become not only possible, but sanctified.

Sacrificial themes, accompanied by biblical quotations that enable participants to jump to the high moral ground, sanitize and sacralize the horror of such occasions. The festival of war generates psychic numbing in which the boundaries of the self are dissolved and a new heroic identity – preferably one that temporarily relieves the painfulness or ignominy or one’s actual status, is forged. ‘You say it is the good cause that hallows every war? I tell you: it is the good war that hallows every cause.’<sup>18</sup>

The festival mindset enables participants to displace responsibility for their actions onto a Higher Power in the name of obedience, and to abdicate their own responsibility. As the poet, Siegfried Sassoon, wrote of the First World War:

And in those seven years I have erected  
A barrier, that my soul might be protected  
Against the invading ghosts of what I saw  
In years when Murder wore the masks of Law.  
(Siegfried Sassoon, ‘A Footnote on the War’)

Toward the end of the *festival* a dramatic act of sacrifice, the *recrucifying of Christ* in the Catholic Mass (or Hiroshima, Nagasaki) often takes place. Such an act ritually re-iterates the

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<sup>17</sup> Condren, Mary (1995), ‘Sacrifice and political legitimation: The construction of a gendered social order’, *The Journal of Women's History* Spring, 6:4; 7:1. pp. 160-89

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich (1969), *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A book for everyone and no one*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, p. 74

thetic moment (the condition of consciousness itself) whether this is envisaged as the break away from or killing of the father – Sigmund Freud – or the mother –Melanie Klein.<sup>19</sup>

Once such a dramatic act takes place, the renewed social order can be re-instated. Kings become kings once again: beggars remain beggars. The after effects of sacrificially designated acts separate what is culturally designated as impure from pure, unconsciousness from consciousness, chaos from civilization. They act to ensure that those we have defined as Other are excluded from the post-sacrificial social or religious order.

Sacrifice through war plays a vital role in the establishment and maintenance of hierarchy,<sup>20</sup> especially now that traditional religion no longer fulfils that purpose. In the post-war period the sacrificial beneficiaries are put in place. In political sacrifice, if one has not fought in the First or Second World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, or in whatever political event established the particular political order, one is an unworthy citizen. War veterans often claim that they can best represent the Common Good for they had *sacrificed themselves* for the survival of the community.

This is why the question of sacrifice, the repudiation of abjection, the process of ‘Othering’ is so important for us today: War has become a new kind of theodicy establishment ritual, now that traditional religion or God no longer fulfils that purpose. War is the ultimate rite of political legitimation in our time.

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<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, Julia (1982), *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Paris: Seuil, 1980 trans. by Leon Roudiez. *Powers of horror*, New York: Columbia University

<sup>20</sup> Jay, Nancy (1992), *Throughout your generations forever: Sacrifice, religion, and paternity*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press

However, if, as post-modernists argue, the propensity to sacrifice or othering appears to be endemic to human consciousness, perhaps the challenge for us today is that like other psychic realities (murder, envy, incest) it can now be analyzed and made amenable to culture and ethics. Spiritual and religious practitioners, (whatever stories or traditions they might work from) share the common duty and responsibility to deconstruct the logic of sacrifice, psychically and politically.

## Self-sacrifice

Challenging the economy of sacrifice, or any of its ritual paraphernalia, is, in any society, considered the ultimate blasphemous act. Not only is the challenge directed toward the structures of power and their legitimation strategies, but also, it seems, toward those figures – dead soldiers in particular – who *died for us*. How could such ingratitude be possible or, indeed, tolerated? Isn't there a difference between *acts of sacrifice* and *self-sacrifice*? After all, was it not said that *greater love no man hath than to lay down his life for his friend*? Biblical epithets such as these are used liberally in war situations. However, they fail to ask if those who are *laying down their lives* do so in the process of taking the lives of others.

Many wars are waged explicitly under the auspices of self-sacrifice. Indeed, as J. Glenn Gray argued:

This capacity for self-sacrifice is what all defenders of war use as their final argument for the necessity and ultimate morality of war. Since men can only be brought by such extreme means to a recognition of their true nature and their essential relationships, these defenders tell us, it is folly to abolish war, because it would be to abolish death itself.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gray, J. Glenn (1970), *The warriors*, New York: Harper & Row, p. 48

In the Irish conflict, Bobby Sands used such language to justify his hunger strike to achieve particular political objectives. Even the visiting chaplains were struck dumb in the face of such discourse.<sup>22</sup> However, in the immediate aftermath of his death, over sixty people were killed in the riots that followed: these deaths are never mentioned in the post-sacrificial scenarios surrounding his legacy.

Failing to challenge such sacrificial logic, therefore, is to leave intact those potent, unconscious factors that underlie sacrificial dynamics and make wars ever more lethal. It is also to leave unchallenged the proposition that there is a necessary continuity between one's ethically based motivation for particular acts and their political effects. As Nietzsche has argued:

Martyrs have harmed truth ... And even today a crude sort of persecution is all that is required to create an *honourable* name for any sect, no matter how indifferent in itself. What? Does the fact that someone gives up his life for it change anything in the value of a cause? ...

Woman is today on her knees before an error because she has been told that someone died on the Cross for it. *Is the Cross then an argument?*

... But blood is the worst witness of truth: blood poisons and transforms the purest teaching to delusion and hatred of the heart.

... And if someone goes through fire for his teaching – what does that prove? Truly, it is more when one's own teaching comes out of one's own burning!<sup>23</sup>

## Politics of Self-sacrifice

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<sup>22</sup> Condren, Mary (2006), 'War, Religion, Gender and Psyche: An Irish Perspective', in Christina von Braun, Ulrike Brunotte, Gabriele Dietze, Daniela Hrzan, Gabriele Jähnert, Dagmar Pruin (eds), *Holy War and Gender: 'Gotteskrieg' und 'Geschlecht'*, Centre for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, (New Brunswick, NJ, London: Transaction Publishers), pp. 143-77.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich (1971), *The Anti-Christ*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.171.

At the risk of engaging in sacrificial logic, or the logic of opposition, the first thing to be said about what mercy *is* must be to elaborate on what it is *not*. Although it may evoke feelings of pity, compassion, charity or love, the practice of mercy cannot be encapsulated by any of these. In particular, *mercy* is not self-sacrifice.

While sacrifice in the public realm can establish tremendous debts of guilt that must be paid off by religious or political devotees, self-sacrifice in the private realm, because it lacks a structure of representation, is perhaps even more powerful. Beneath the uses of the words, self-sacrifice, however well intentioned, may also be the urge to gain control, to solicit or establish the indebtedness of the gods, family, Church or nation.

For those with little access to social power, self-sacrifice confers authority on their actions and establishes a process of indebtedness at the same time. Using myths of salvation, disturbed individuals, or whole societies undergoing identity crises, can surmount their feelings of powerlessness by adopting new mythological identities while blocking the painful process of actual development.

Much like the practice of sacrifice, self-sacrifice can be a spurious means of constructing an ego or identity where the original one has never been formed or is badly damaged. For instance, if someone does something for the love of God, the revolution or the starving masses in Africa, the discourse of self-sacrifice provides the necessary legitimation and the subsequent actions will not be a threat to the dominant order. However, the valorization the self-sacrificer receives serves to

reinforce her or his circumscribed roles while doing nothing to change the social conditions of those at the receiving end of such charity.

### **Self-sacrifice in political action**

Self-sacrifice can be profoundly political especially in its ability (like sacrifice) to compel indebtedness. Whereas public sacrifice often leads to forms of political hegemony, self-sacrifice can lead to masochism, horizontal violence and self-sacrificial ideologies that function to keep oppressed groups in subservience.<sup>24</sup> The culture of self-sacrifice carries with it the myth of powerlessness, often preventing oppressed groups from studying the kinds of power they do have, reducing them to a condition of moral imbecility in the use of that power.

Especially in those groups where oppressed people are actively striving to change their conditions, self-sacrifice leads to what is often described as implosions of power. The operative myth here is that since everyone ‘has made sacrifices’ for the revolution, political action, or whatever, the group formed has implicitly (and magically) collapsed all personal differences overnight. Groups apparently band together in equality for the sake of a common goal, but then furiously try to erase all differences appearing among them, especially that represented by a leader who gains power apparently ‘at our expense’.

Such dynamics lead to the leadership thrashing that alternative political groups regularly experience. They turn such leaders into scapegoats who, excluded from the community,

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<sup>24</sup> Irigaray, Luce (1993), *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris, 1987). Translated by Gillian C. Gill, *Sexes and genealogies*, New York: Columbia University Press

magically take away their own envy and jealousy, re-establishing the group's purity.<sup>25</sup> As Luce Irigaray argues of women's self-sacrifice:

Forbidden to celebrate ritual or to participate in social institutions, women are reduced to the polemics and rules of the private sphere. Women are habitually confined to the home and to relations with other women, with children, with mothers and daughters ... Revenge is taken, outside of law or rights, in the form of private attacks, whether concerted or not.<sup>26</sup>

## **Motherhood and Self-sacrifice**

Women usually do not go to war or sacrifice in any of the major religious traditions but their capacity for self-sacrifice has potent political effects. Women develop over-compensatory forms of motherhood (the suffocating maternal bond) in lieu of their general powerlessness, but then effectively recreate those situations that keep them powerless.

The fact that a woman has sacrificed gives her the right to make powerful demands upon her children since there is an element of blackmail involved. Often these demands are not even articulated, leaving the children in a considerable state of confusion and anxiety. The end result of using guilt in order to achieve one's ends are, however, usually alienation, disappointment and bitterness for the martyr, and considerable justification and unexpressed hostility for those whom she wished to control – the famous Jewish or Irish mothers are good examples.

Women who try furiously to adapt to their roles in the sacrificial social order, sacrifice themselves. Those who are the mercy of such a mother's ambivalent 'self-sacrifice' often resort

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<sup>25</sup> Condren, Mary (1997), 'Forgetting our divine origins: The warning of Dervogilla', in Joan Marler (ed), *From the realm of the Ancestors: An anthology in honor of Marija Gimbutas*, Manchester, CT: Knowledge and Ideas Inc, pp. 416-31.

<sup>26</sup> Irigaray (1993), p. 85

to violent and contradictory ways in order to shake it off. In the face of their mother's seeming powerlessness, sons desperately define themselves as *Not-Women*, and search furiously for a compensatory, revengeful and exaggerated male identity that often finds violent expression resulting in the vicious cycle of 'the mother, the macho and the state'.<sup>27</sup>

Women who buy into the myth of their own powerlessness, who have no sense of self-worth, become incapable of conferring an enabling form of recognition upon their children, allowing them successfully to individuate. Often, according to Sara Ruddick, the 'good mother' trains her 'daughters for powerlessness and sons for war'.<sup>28</sup> Their female children will usually react to this by emulating their mother's behaviour and lack of self esteem, making them particularly prone to becoming co-dependants of substance abusers, and vulnerable to the physical and psychological abusiveness of the sadomasochistic syndrome.

## **Self-sacrifice and Power**

Self-sacrifice is not the power to make decisions; it is the power to be anarchistic, to react against decisions and make us even more dependent on those who hold the real political power in our society. It is covert rather than overt; dependent rather than independent. Understood as charity, self-sacrifice can be an uncritical means for some to retain status, power and privilege in an exploitative economy that discriminates against the poor, oppressed and those against whom the dominant social order has been established.

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<sup>27</sup> Myers, Joan (1984), 'The Mother, the Macho, and the State', *International Journal of Women's Studies* 1:1, 73-82.

<sup>28</sup> Ruddick, Sara. (1989), *Maternal Thinking*, London: Women's Press

It establishes what Erik Erickson (1963) has termed the ‘devious dominance’ of oppressed subjects, or the ‘tyranny of the weak’. The kind of power thus exercised is essentially *victim power*. A character in a Graham Greene story once observed a nun crying in a train. Asked why she was crying, the nun replied that she had spent her life in a leprosy colony and now ‘they have found a cure for leprosy’.

The dominant social order welcomes self-sacrificial initiatives since it cleans up the excesses of the individualist striving that underlie the exacerbated quest for autonomy. As Elise Boulding (1988) argues, the energies common to human beings have been redirected so that men seek power and women protect men from the consequences of power seeking.

Sacrifice and self-sacrifice are, therefore, two sides of the same coin. The alternative is not simply self-indulgence but mercy, a practice carved out from the excruciating path toward self-awareness.

## **What Is Mercy?**

Although sacrifice has been the subject of countless tomes, debates and even wars, the theological question of mercy has rarely been explicitly addressed. It could be argued that the radical potential of *mercy* has never been developed simply because it has not been in the interests of the powerful to do so. Sacrifice has served European culture very well, legitimizing its political structures and its colonial efforts across the world.

Yet, just as the word ‘sacrifice’ has, in the history of religions, been used to serve the interests of those in power, so too the word ‘mercy’ has often uncritically shored up exploitative and inequitable regimes. In the Christian tradition, Mary, the Mother of God, is regularly appealed to in prayer as *mother of mercy*. The role of Mary, however, is often devious. In legends she undermines the harsh decisions of a judging God. Likewise, goddesses within patriarchal traditions often sabotage the brutal effects of a sacrificial theology. This may be a subtle way of re-enforcing a punitive system by providing a refuge from its harsher doctrines without challenging its basic nature.

In the Christian tradition we often hear the words ‘Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ The word ‘Lord’ implies dominance. Those who define themselves as sinners are often those culturally abject. The mercy appealed to can be an unwitting way of shoring up oppressive regimes and maintaining intact the power structure of those regimes.

However, in the work of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, sacrifice is not just a problem to which mercy is the solution, as in the injunction ‘Lord be merciful to me, a sinner.’ Whenever the prophets use the words ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’ they directly challenge the religious and political powers of their time. The prophets call for mercy when the priestly classes wish to use sacrifice to control the acts of God, to enforce submission to petty religious proscriptions or to exclude the *abject* (tax collectors or sinners) from the company of Jesus. (Hosea 6:1-6; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Matthew 9:13, 12:1-8.)

An example of mercy is Jesus' response to those who condemned a woman caught in adultery. Condemned by the religious officaries of her time, they tried to implicate Jesus in her stoning. Jesus responded: 'If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' (John 8:7). This story captures the essence of the practice of mercy: recognizing the potential for evil or the shadow in ourselves, or in the logic of our group, at the moment we hold the stones in our hands.

If maintaining the sacrificial social order takes serious work, the practice of mercy is no less demanding. Adopting the stance of mercy is to commit oneself to a life's work of personal and cultural critique. Akin to cultural shadow work, the practice of mercy aims to understand the process of projection and abjection; deconstruct our impetus to make Others; evolve imaginative ways of non-sacrificial knowing; and work toward structural relations of justice.

## **The Practice of Mercy**

Whereas sacrifice and self-sacrifice shore up unjust regimes, the litmus test for mercy is whether our practices aim toward eradicating structures of privilege and injustice, rather than maintaining such structures to provide subtle and devious means of maintaining our own superiority.

Traditionally, priests practice sacrifice, while prophets call for mercy. Prophets are all those cultural critics – artists, poets, writers, political activists – who call a community to integrity, having little authorization but the witness of their lives and faithfulness to their calling. Prophets stand outside the sacrificial social order (whether by choice or destiny) alongside the excluded,

the rejected, the outcasts, perpetually asking the awkward questions. Prophets are not fortune-tellers: prophets are those who do not so much 'foresee' the future as work actively to imagine and ensure a better future for all. It is the fate of prophets to have more questions than answers. The practice of mercy, therefore, might be encapsulated as the practice and art of asking the awkward questions. The first of these concerns power.

### **What is the currency of power?**

The work of mercy is that of reading and excavating the currency of power that can often be best illustrated in the cultural codes of abjection. The prophet de-codes the codes of abjection to see what is excluded, what is valued, who is being pushed out, where is it happening? Since these codes sometimes change, within and between cultures, the prophet cries out 'mercy, not sacrifice' when whole communities seek to condemn their 'Others' into subjugation.

The prophet might ask: Why do features of skin (colour) matter, rather than other defining bodily characteristics? Why does erasing psychic abjection (psychiatrists, priests) cost so much more than erasing bodily abjection (nurses, cleaners)? What are we to make, for instance, of the fact that whereas the blood of women defiles, the blood of men saves? Why are women raped in war whereas men are killed rather than castrated? What unconscious language is operative here?

### **Who are the scapegoats?**

An old Celtic text says that sacrifice is responsible for rescuing the earth from the demons (Rees and Rees, 1978, p. 79). Creating demons appears to be one of the central tasks of religious

functionaries. Indeed, without demons (scapegoats on whom we can project all our own unresolved psychic issues), sacrificially based religions could hardly exist.

The scapegoat serves to reinforce the boundaries of the dominant group. Fallen women, Magdalenes, serve to remind women of the awful fate that awaits them should they challenge or ignore the requirements of patriarchal marriage. Once such demons or 'Others' have been created, religious sacrifice has traditionally acted to ensure that they are excluded from social or religious order.

If sacrifice rescues the earth from the demons, mercy might now rescue the demons from those who define them as such. A merciful practice challenges the scapegoating system by actively seeking out the excluded, rejected and marginalized – all those at whose expense a dominant identity has been achieved.

Traditional scapegoats, practices and texts contain vital clues about the mentality of the sacrificial social order. The practice of mercy seeks them out for their own sakes, but also for the information they hold about the sacrificial mentality. We should, as Michel Foucault (1972) argues, look to the subjugated knowledges and practices, especially those made problematic by the sacrificial social order. These include traditional ethnic wisdom and language, expurgated texts, the medical wisdom of the wise women, the texts eliminated from the canons of sacred scripture.

In ancient Irish society, the poets were those who lived liminally. They delivered their pronouncement at the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld, potent sources of creativity. Prophets – like artists, poets, theologians, mythologists and dancers – must do the personal, cultural and political work necessary to keep those boundaries fluid, playful and open in the interests, not so much of the Otherworld, but the World of the Other.

In this sense, the scandal of the cross would be located, not in defending an outmoded world-view, or engaging in masochistic or transgressive practices, but in taking on one's shoulders the task of generating cultural forms of *mercy* toward those culturally constructed as *abject*.

### **Mercy allows the flow of grace**

Those who offer sacrifice ask that it be pleasing to God, but in reality, little room is left in the economy of sacrifice for the workings of the unearned gift of God's grace. Grace is mediated through the sacrificial officaries or their work. Since those charged with interpreting Sacred Scripture – Tradition, or Charter texts – are those carrying full honours in the sacrificial economy, change or renewal becomes difficult, if not impossible. The assumption is made that God, grace or mercy could not possibly exist or be an ongoing reality for anyone other than those charged with being channels of that grace; that is, the ordained.

Just as sacrifice constantly requires an Other, the grace deriving from sacrifice depends on a constant flow of sin. The sin industry has been responsible for much of the degradation that has crept into Christianity. The Protestant Reformations challenged this degradation. Clerical corruption, the sale of indulgences, monopolies of power (control of the economy of sacrifice and implicitly grace, has been widespread. But these Reformations (with the exception of some

radical sects) left unchallenged the economy or logic of sacrifice insofar as it merely appropriated the power of sacrifice to itself – often in the interests of the new European nation states.

If sacrifice seeks to control the work of grace, mercy leaves us powerless to act except by the grace of God. A theology of mercy stands with the prophet Job at the height of his affliction. Against all his detractors, he bowed to ineffability. Such evil, as he experienced, could never be caused or willed by God. Job knew that eliminating fate, chance or tragedy in the human condition has inevitably led to greater human evil. The great Greek tragedians also knew this. But, as Simone Weil points out, it is something that those who, in their urge to control, conveniently and quickly forgot.<sup>29</sup>

‘There, but for the grace of God, go I’ summarizes in one breath the difference between a theology based on sacrifice, control and power, and a theology based on mercy, compassion and grace.

## **Where are our origins?**

Global technology has infiltrated the whole world. Ironically, however, this has not led to global peace but often to even more desperate searches for identity, purity of origins and heroic mythologies. Far from coming to terms with our own human limitations, our minuteness in the scheme of things, and to a reverence for our Mother the Earth on whom all our foundations rest,

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<sup>29</sup> Simone Weil (1981), ‘The Illiad: A Poem of Might’, pp. 181-2, in George A. Panichas (ed), *The Simone Weil Reader: A Legendary Spiritual Odyssey for Our Time*, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc.)

political strategies increasingly seem designed to sacrifice the earth for the sake of one or other synthetically constructed heroic identity. The sacrificial mentality has never seemed more dangerous.

A vital component of the public rites of sacrifice that serves to renew the social order has been the myth of return to the Golden Age, a time of pristine purity unpolluted by contaminated political or mythical lineages. Returning to origins is often necessary to challenge the hegemony of the present political order, to renew culture and to remember the ideals held out in one's charter documents. But how do we go about such return? What counts as origins?

Our experience in Europe (not least in Ireland) would suggest that the return to origins, ancient traditions, can be deeply ambivalent and profoundly retrogressive. Political groups appeal to their founding charters, the Battle of the Boyne, Easter 1916, the First World War, ethnic lineages, not for inspiration and renewal but to hold onto petrified and often unjust political divisions. Our biblical ancestors were told to take the women and children captive and put all the men to the sword, thus erasing the patrilineal inheritance of the defeated. The ancient Greeks thought that by re-establishing or tracing a pure lineage (unpolluted by foreigners) they could achieve social perfection.

Such 'return to origins' is chillingly replicated in war today where war often serves to erase the lineage of one's opponent. Rape camps in the Balkans were specifically designed to erase ethnicity or permanently pollute the bloodlines of the defeated. Aid workers in Bosnia observed male and female corpses coming into hospitals with their abdomens closed with pins. The

abdomens of pregnant women had been filled with sand: their fetuses were placed inside the bodies of defeated male soldiers.

In addition, such myths of origins play on deeply powerful human dreams of the possibility of unmediated intimacy with the pre-Oedipal mother. As Scott Peck wrote:

A crucial factor in evil ... is not simply a regressive yearning for Mother (which can be used for healing) but rather the attempt to obtain Mother without regression – an insistence on receiving mothering without relinquishing either the adult role or any of the power associated with it.<sup>30</sup>

Returning to origins must, therefore, be mediated by an understanding of its underlying logic, a logic that can be playful and imaginative, or reified and cruel. Simply using Mother language does not guarantee immunity from evil: indeed, it can often be the source. In Nazi Germany and in other wars, the appeal to the *Motherland* was simply a devious strategy that exploited deep psychic longings. All who did not conform to the cultural ideal of purity were exterminated.

Such rituals, or such concern for the *Motherland* within the mystifying rhetoric of war, conceals its phallic underpinning.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on maternal energy, it functions similarly to the Virgin Mary, offering a putative idealization of women, while simultaneously keeping real women in their place. For instance, a common ritual of kingship in early Ireland was that of the king bathing in the blood of a mare. Other rituals involve the king entering the menstruation hut,

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<sup>30</sup> Scott Peck, J. (1983), *People of the lie*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 160

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, Jessica (1988), *Bonds of love: psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of domination*, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 141

usually the scene of abjection. The king, according to one theorist, absorbed ‘the female entropy’, which the priest ‘transforms into energy’.<sup>32</sup>

Strategies also serve race division. As Toni Morrison observes: ‘A layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law.’<sup>33</sup> Whites take on the trappings of minstrelsy or use Black sources of wisdom, mythology, song or poetry, not to open up the cultural possibilities for Blacks but to establish their own street credibility or even to gain temporary release from the rigours of culture. Judges may sleep with prostitutes, regenerating themselves in preparation for the rigours of the law; prostitutes seeking consensual sex from judges would be prosecuted. The rich appear on the doorsteps of the poor with gifts, but the poor enter the houses of the rich only by invitation (or payment). In this light we can understand how the return to origins or abjection can have very different effects on the powerless and the powerful. Today, such strategies often serve to reinforce the structures of gender, class and race.

Such festival or transgressive strategies often serve to ostensibly offer pseudo means of crossing liminal boundaries, but their consequences are asymmetrical for the powerful and the powerless. Kings gain power by becoming beggars: beggars just look ridiculous acting like kings. While the powerful can only gain power by returning to abjection, the powerless become even more powerless.

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<sup>32</sup> Yamaguchi, Masao (1988), ‘Towards a Poetics of the Scapegoat’, in Paul Dumouchel (ed), *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 187

<sup>33</sup> Morrison, Toni (1993), *Playing in the dark: whiteness and literary imagination*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 66

The question of choice is crucial. Female rituals dealing with menstrual blood are greeted with amusement or horror; Blacks celebrating aspects of Black culture are treated with condescension. In western culture, women, Blacks, homosexuals could be said to be permanently in a state of culturally enforced abjection. It is necessary to learn the difference between condescension and liberation; charity and justice and simply immersing in abjection as a strategy of power.

An astute prophetic community comprising artists, poets, musicians, writers and dancers will recognize the need for such communal regression and find ways to enable wholesome reconciliations between ourselves and the earth, between genders, classes and races. Likewise, for cultural regeneration, we must develop and reclaim rituals, stories, practices that enable regeneration to happen in ways that preclude sacrificial resolution and foster imagination, empathy and hope.

### **What counts as knowledge?**

When Jesus and the prophets cried out for mercy not sacrifice they were crying out against petrified social and religious realities. They were protesting the sacrificial mentality and calling for a change of heart.

Traditional theology confines itself to a petrified notion of truth: that revelation apparently ceased shortly after the death of Jesus and any further revelations must be mediated through the ministrations and authority of the priestly caste whose authority is sacrificially legitimated.

The practice of mercy will involve developing new forms of knowing, inclusive of the multi-dimensionality of human experience. In the Hebrew Bible the word ‘knowing’ meant to love (Adam knew his wife); to struggle (Jacob wrestled with the angel); to honour (the people knew their God). In the West, knowing has been reduced to *knowing about*. Physically we hear the cries of the poor; physically we see the images of malnourishment; physically we might even smell the poverty around us,

*Philosophia* (the love of wisdom) is open to continuing revelation. Revelation can come from many sources: reflections on historical experiences, on the fragility and goodness of nature including our own, and a reflection on the experience of being victims of the sacrificial social order. *Philosophia* is fluid rather than rigid; tentative rather than petrified; open to new challenges rather than defending the orthodoxy. *Philosophia* works not only toward right theory but, more importantly, toward praxis, the union of action and theory devoted to creating a more just social order.

If sacrificial thinking cuts out ambiguity, thrives on dualisms and rigid thinking, closes off imagination and fosters an either/or logic, merciful thinking does the opposite. Merciful practice inspires questions, seeks out the sacrificial victims, fosters imagination and welcomes ambivalence – especially deriving from the rejected parts of ourselves.

While sacrifice establishes one’s identity at the expense of the Other, mercy embraces the Other. Through mercy, we are confronted with the radical Otherness within ourselves. Loving all those bodily and psychic parts that sacrificial ideologies consider unclean or abject, merciful practices

enable us to confront our own strangeness. In this way we are able to open ourselves up to what Eva Gore-Booth called 'imaginative pity'. As she wrote: 'A soldier, with a universal imagination would not be able to kill another.'<sup>34</sup>

If sacrifice is the prerogative of the priests and political leaders, mercy is the prerogative of those who stand alongside the outcasts, perpetually asking questions that challenge the status quo. The wise among us must refuse the corruption of easy solutions.

## **Maternal thinking**

One way to develop imaginative pity might be to engage in what social theorist Sara Ruddick calls 'maternal thinking'.<sup>35</sup> Maternal thinking is possibly most akin to the logic of mercy. Some biblical commentators translate mercy as 'womb-love'.

Here is the challenge of mercy: not to be the flip side of a sacrificial theology, but to form the basis of a radical challenging new notion, derived from our experiences of unconditional love, 'womb-love', theorized to take account of the multiple dimensions of human experience. How do we draw on these dimensions to develop integrative ways of knowing, integrative ways of theologizing that no longer need to take place at the expense of the other?

Political theorists traditionally separate the ethics of the common good (the sphere of politics) from those of the family. In the public world, individuals, communities, tribes and even whole

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<sup>34</sup> Gore-Booth, Eva (1923), *A psychological and poetic approach to the study of christ in the fourth gospel*, London: Longmans, Green & Co, p. 319

<sup>35</sup> Ruddick, Sara (1989), *Maternal Thinking*, London: Women's Press

nations are commonly sacrificed whenever the occasion demands, justified by the most expedient moral high ground. In the world of the family, mercy, and not sacrifice, is usually the dominant ethos.

Ruddick's work attempts to reconcile the ethics of the private and public worlds.

Maternal thinking might ensure that the complexity brought to the discipline of childrearing (compassion, the embracing of complexity, the caring for the weak, equal access to family resources for all) can be theorized and brought to bear in the public world.

Ruddick insists that maternal thinking is a discipline to be nurtured, akin to non-violence training. Maternal thinking is not the prerogative of women: in the world of the family men also operate under its norms. Nevertheless, macho posturing too often substitutes for parental authority; point scoring for family mediation; winning the argument for holding family peace; the selfish cornering of economic resources for the careful sharing of family life.

Ruddick, together with other feminist theorists of the last twenty years of the twentieth century, point out that the logic that has governed the most powerful political and religious worlds in the West has been dominated by masculinist thinking. Some argue that male morphology has fundamentally shaped our political and religious thinking. By this they mean that the male experience of sexuality (tension, discharge and homeostasis) shapes both political action and the culture of representation. Such a political order serves neither men nor women, although men, fortified by cultural mythology, often are convinced that they enjoy a spurious power within it.

At the end of two thousand years we must commit ourselves to exploring the implications of this morphology and ask whether mercy, maternal thinking or womb-love might not offer a way forward together, for women and for men.

## Conclusions

As we seek to lead lives with integrity, the following questions must be foremost in our minds. Do we reduce the banquet table (which in the early Christian Church represented the essential equality of all) to an altar of sacrifice, or do we develop the image of the banquet where the resources of this earth are available to all regardless of race, gender or class status?

For those who are Christian, do we say Jesus took away the sins of the world, and interpret the death of Jesus as a sacrifice? Or that Jesus was murdered, not just because he was loving and compassionate, but precisely because he, as well as many other religious founders, actively opposed the sacrificial thinking of the religious and political powers of his time? <sup>36</sup>

And herein lies the challenge. At a time of increased globalization, can the altars of sacrifice be replaced by the banquet tables of mercy; a spirituality of death by a spirituality of life; hearts of stone by hearts of flesh?

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<sup>36</sup> Reich, Wilhelm (1952), *The Murder of Christ: The Emotional Plague of Mankind*, New York: Simon and Schuster

