

Christian Families Growing to Maturity: Feminist Reflections on the Loss of Innocence.

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In receiving this Sophia Fellowship I am grateful to and wish to thank The College of St Mark and St John and The Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology for giving me the space in which to write.

During my teaching career one of my interests has always been in the hidden curriculum; what it is that students learn that is not in the lesson plans but found within the ethos of the school including the kind of attitudes addressed in Equal Opportunities Programmes that look at issues such as racism and sexism across the curriculum. My present research in feminist theology and sacrament focuses that interest on the way that sacramental celebration of the presence of the divine in our lives is experienced through symbolic representation and to what extent that symbolism reflects an ethos that upholds the integrity of women. This paper is concerned with uncovering the layers of meaning behind the familiarity of the concept of family and the familial imagery in relation to the Divine manifest in Christian beliefs and rites.

I was brought up in a Catholic Family and did my initial training to teach in the 60's in a Catholic college in Liverpool. It was a time of great change, not least with the second wave of the feminist movement that promised new freedom to us young women. In the church the Second Vatican Council also gave some hope to those of us who were struggling to reconcile the exciting changing social situation with the Tradition of Roman Catholic Christianity. Thirty years later I find that the changes are minimal, traditionalists and progressives seemingly more at odds, with the Religious Right calling for a return to Family values of previous eras, a call that seemingly addresses the evil encountered in the world but a return that would have the most far reaching consequences for women. Appreciation

of a more innocent state such as that of the young child can be very alluring but maintaining innocence into adulthood is not the way to maturity in relationships and responsibility. My contention is that the Christian milieu in cahoots with culture has prescribed a restrictive role for women that stunts growth to maturity expecting women in particular be childlike and regarded as incapable of participating in ethical decision making and influencing both secular and religious culture. The authority for this comes from Tradition, Theology and from the 'Word of God' and is maintained by the powerful sacramental structure and performance of culture passed on within the birth family and the family of the church that upholds a symbolic system detrimental to women's maturity and agency. Maintaining the concept of the Christian family of the Right depends on given gender roles, learnt in the family, that are restrictive and oppressive and that limit not only women's development but also our concept of family and our understanding of the divine, excluding many from any possibility of a belief that the divine presence may be manifest in their relationships. In order to become mature Rita Nakashima Brock contends that women have to lose their innocence. I would like to argue that it is only when our idea of a Christian family matures in wisdom and understanding of what that might mean can it be used as a basis for our understanding of God.

Little has been written in the area of feminist theology and sacrament but Susan Ross in *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*¹ explores how sacraments can accommodate the feminine, favouring the concept of Family as the embodied context for sacramentality. Ross argues forcefully for the ethic of care and practice of justice to be accommodated in both the private and public realms. From a feminist point of view Ross argues on three points for the use of family as a context for sacramentality: namely the interaction of relationships, imperfection and embodiment and gender.

This emphasis on family for me is problematic having found as a single adult that some of my most significant relationships were outside of the family amongst friends. Ross recognized that the family as a model had limitations but argues that the idea of family is a goal to be strived for, family she sees as 'an institution that involves and affects all persons, even those not living in what might be termed a traditional family context (for example, single people).'² The use of the term 'even those', however I find somewhat alarming and would like to examine further the limitations of family as a basis for a feminist sacramental theology, in terms of relationship, imperfection and gender.

Family, like all our social institutions has a history that tends to get lost as the tradition gains momentum and the Christian idea of family is no exception. In setting out this brief picture of the changes in the perception of family in the Christian religious tradition I am using the recently published work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*³, and L. William Countryman's book concerning sexual ethics entitled *Dirt, Greed and Sex*.⁴

The emergence of family groups based on monogamous male/female relationships would seem to have taken place with the movement in the stages of human development from hunter gatherer society to that of farmer, the domestication of plants and animals resulting in the private rather than communal ownership of property. According to the Marxist theorists, Fredrich Engels⁵ and L H Morgan⁶, in order to solve the problem of inheritance monogamous marriage and the nuclear family were enforced ensuring the male's control over the question of paternity. Before this Engels argued a classless,

¹ Ross, Susan, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

² Ross, p. 129

³ Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston; Beacon Press, 2000).

⁴ Countryman, L. William, *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (London: Xpress Reprints, 1996).

⁵ Engels, Fiedrich, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Penguin Books), 1986.

matrilineal, and polygamous society existed gradually giving way to a male dominated social structure based on economy and private property. It is well to note here that Engels' theory of the importance of economics and the sexual division of labour has been criticised for disregarding the reason for the dividing of community property to women and private property to men and their subsequent value in society. According to Flax, Engels' belief in an original sexual division of labour in the sexual act requires that any attempt at liberating women must take into account not only challenging the institution of private property as in Marxist theory but must also challenge heterosexuality itself.⁷ I will be considering this later in the context of gender but at the moment wish to underline the possibility of a social structure that did not depend on patriarchy and the small family unit but still provided the main functions carried out by the family of child rearing, socialisation, and maintenance of economic and social needs. It was not this kind of loose familial social organisation that Jesus would have been born into, nor the small nuclear unit of man and wife and children that we two thousand years later think of as family but a highly structured Jewish system within the Greco-Roman culture, both based on the authority of the Father. Whilst there were some differences between the cultures the basic structure followed similar lines. There was in these societies a distinction made between household and kin, based on the patrilineal order supporting specific hierarchical relations. The modern notion of husband and wife as kin was not the norm of ancient households but part of a wider concept of the household that was responsible for the functions of child rearing, socialisation, and the maintenance of the economic and social needs of an extensive social group. These households consisted of a male patriarch, the paterfamilias,

⁶ Morgan Lewis H., *Ancient Society Researches in the lines of human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilisation. The Early Sociology of the Family Volume III*, (New York: Routledge/Thoemmes Press) 1998. First published 1877 by Charles H. Kerr & Co.

⁷In: Putman Tong, Rosemarie, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* Oxford: Westview Press), 1998, pp.104-5.

his wife and concubines together with children, their wives, and slaves. The main function of wives was to maintain the viability of the male lineage by producing children, sons to carry on the family name and daughters to be exchanged in marriage contracts. Slaves were not allowed to marry, their children deemed illegitimate, thus ensuring they could not be heirs of the father and carry on the family name. Kin was a much closer-knit group within the paterfamilia's household and consisted of father and his sons who always remained members of the father's house. Women's kinship was more complicated.

'The wife remained, in some sense, a part of her family, too, and would return to them if she were divorced or left widowed and childless. ... Generally speaking men were kin to their mothers and to both the men and women of their father's house while women were kin only to their sons and to their immediate female relatives...'⁸

It was not possible within this construct to stand as an individual, without a specific place in the household one was marginalized and outside the religious tradition that was perpetuated through the household and family life. With some exceptions in terms of lesser restrictions, women had no autonomous authority but were a transferable commodity in the male familial economy. Religious belief was handed on by the father and closely connected to the continuation of family lineage and the larger kin network making up national identities, the role of the paterfamilias being to maintain the family's wealth and public standing, all relationships and actions to be subordinated to this end.

Countryman posits that in these patriarchal cultures wives and children were considered as property, an extension of the male self, producing a code of sexual ethics related to the family that would be inconsistent to the modern era. In line with this idea of women and children as property the laws on adultery and incest were concerned not simply with the laws of purity or with the modern Western concerns of the integrity and violation of the

⁸ Countryman, p. 160.

person but was defined 'as a violation of the intra-family hierarchy... (that) was an expression of proper relations, a way of exercising ownership over human property, which could not be manipulated like real estate or domestic animals.'⁹ 'All in all in matters of sexual ethics condemnation of any behaviour depended on putting 'personal gratification ahead of family duty.'¹⁰ Critical to this was the religious belief in the coming Messiah born of the house of David who would redeem Israel and ensure the continuation of its people. Given this kind of cultural tradition Jesus' attitude to family would appear to be somewhat radical. His genealogy outlined at the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, tracing his family history through Joseph to the house of David, would place him firmly in the mainstream of the 'tribes of Israel' and yet the people he chose to spend his time with were those on the margins of this society – the tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners – whilst those who were his constant companions were required to transfer allegiance from family to follow him as itinerant preacher. Ruether raises the question of Jesus' own marginality within the wider context of the Jewish world pointing out that naming Jesus as 'the son of Mary', not the son of her husband, was the standard way of naming her child as illegitimate. Pointing to the work of Jane Schaberg¹¹ she suggests that the virgin birth story may be a way of explaining the lack of mention of a father figure in Jesus' confrontations with his family in his home-town of Nazareth. Countryman goes further stating that Jesus himself claimed that if he was David's son as the crowds at Jerusalem called him he would also be 'his own ancestor's lord (2:41-46) – a concept which turned normal family hierarchy on its head.'¹² Looking at Matthew's gospel, Countryman suggests that as Joseph was not Jesus' father, 'Son of David' had to mean something more than

⁹ Countryman, p. 159.

¹⁰ Countryman, p. 165.

¹¹ Schaberg, Jane, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) in Ruether 2000, pp. 27-28.

¹² Countryman, p 170.

family descent, making the virginity of Mary important 'because it broke the physical connection of Jesus with his own "father's house." ... Jesus' own birth was thus a paradigm of the separation from family which he would subsequently require of his followers.'¹³

Could it be said that Jesus was anti- family? Some of the gospel accounts of Jesus' demands for discipleship would seem to point that way. To give one example: (Mark 3:31-35) "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking round on those who sat about him, he said, 'here are my mother and my brothers! Anyone who does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" (Mark 3:31-35) (Others can be found in (Luke 14:26) (Matt. 8:21-22) (Matt. 4:21-22). (Matt. 10:35-36) Mark 13:12)¹⁴)

These are not the commands of the dutiful son respecting the Tradition. Jesus went further in challenging the Tradition by prohibiting divorce for both men and women, except in the case of adultery, thus changing the relationship of man and wife, that effectively brought about equality in the sexual freedom of both parties; women were no longer to be the possession of men. Further challenge to the family structure can be seen in Jesus' denial of the need for money and property that was exalted in the tradition whilst the story of the prodigal son and the fathers' response totally reverses the norm of familial relationships.

This anti-family stance appealed particularly to those for whom the family structure offered little in terms of kinship. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy found in Jesus' admonition to become like little children a new concept of family in which all were equal in status before God. 'In the new "family" of Jesus' followers, there are only children, no

¹³ Countryman, p. 170.

¹⁴ Ruether, pp.25-26

patriarchs'¹⁵ and as such they are empowered to claim their dignity as heirs to the reign of God.

In line with this teaching in the Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus and the beginnings of the early Church a new kinship was displayed. All could be called to the common table, Gentiles as well as Jews, women and children as well as men, slaves as well as free; all are to be in the same relationship as the father/son relationship of the paterfamilia of the ancients, all were kin, all could therefore call God Abba. To join this group was to challenge the household religion and the status quo. Ruether states:

The subversion of family allegiance and hierarchical order by Christian conversion, particularly when the convert was a subjugated person in the family –that is, a wife, youth, or slave –invoked great hostility toward Christianity in the gentile world, which typically saw it as undermining the order of the family and of the state. It suggested a new freedom of women, young people and slaves to disobey their husbands, fathers and masters and make their own choices about their lives.¹⁶

It would seem therefore that Jesus had encouraged disobedience, a dangerous act especially for women given the power of the Genesis myth of the fall and the story of the tragic consequences following their loss of innocence. The emerging church displayed an egalitarian stance that has not been equalled since, with the potential to replace the family in the functions of child rearing, socialisation, and maintenance of economic and social needs. In this freedom gender stereotyping and binary concepts of sexualities might have been challenged. However the egalitarianism was not to last or reach fulfilment as the tensions inherent in its position within the dominant cultures proved to be too strong. This was in part because of the belief of the impending eschaton, that moment in time when Jesus would return and establish the reign of God on the earth. The Christology of the early Church rested in the ancient belief of a Messiah who would free them from their

¹⁵ Countryman, p. 171, citing Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 147-51.

oppression under neighbouring states and whilst believing that Jesus was the Christ, and that they belonged to him, there was a belief that his work was not finished and his return imminent. The early Christians were exhorted to take a stance of waiting, long-term social change not being required in view of the approaching end times; even marriage was to be put on hold, the celibate state being more conducive to focussing on the coming eschaton. That Jesus never claimed to be that kind of Messianic figure; that the kingdom he spoke of was within people's hearts and expressed in their relationships; that their task was to live out now the kingdom of inclusive love that he had modelled was lost beneath the prevailing religious and cultural traditions.

Countryman finds positive evidence in the Letters of John and James of this differing attitude. However, in 1 Peter and the Pastoral Epistles a change is seen with the desire to keep the church respectable by conforming to the prevailing social mores, maintaining a conservative family life whilst it could still function as family for those who had no alternative. In Timothy 1 the equality of women is challenged, widows are no longer to be ministers and women's subordination is justified theologically: they will be saved by childbearing. Hierarchy has been re-established not only in the church in the establishment of ministries, open only to men, but also in the call to obey secular authority. '...The subordination of the family to the reign of God disappeared altogether....'¹⁷ In considering the actions of the early church leaders Countryman concludes: they

'... were dealing with threats to the church, both external and internal, which they felt required the church to present an unexceptionable face to the public and exert clearer control within its own community. In the process they converted Paul's eschatologically based approval of traditional family mores into a principled insistence on them. Whatever their needs and intentions were at the time, however, this had the subsequent effect of nullifying most of the fundamental egalitarianism and the rejection of the

¹⁶ Ruether, p. 32.

¹⁷ Countryman, p. 229.

family found in Jesus' gospel. First Peter and the Pastorals, on the whole, have dominated later Christian thought on the subjects of marriage and women.¹⁸

Ruether contends that it is this same tension that divides the churches today in the pull between the fundamentalists and the progressives and that what is needed is a 'reevaluation of the historical Christian tradition on the meaning of family, as it evolved from New Testament antifamily views into the patristic and medieval perspectives and then into those of the Reformation and modern eras.'¹⁹ She traces the movement from the egalitarian church with its vision of a kingdom of God in which all oppression was overcome, through the patristic period with the establishment of the three tiered hierarchy of celibate male elite, a marginalized female celibate elite under the subjection of the clergy and a lower class of the married laity whose 'participation in sex and procreation marked it as belonging to the lower, sinful world'²⁰. Viewing marriage as a sacrament she points out was ambiguous and indeed only the third of Augustine's 'goods' of marriage whilst the Reformers negated marriage as a sacrament at all. For the production of children it was necessary and for the curbing of concupiscence. Ruether states:

'Thereby patriarchy was ratified as an ordinance of nature, and women's subjugation within creation reinforced as a punishment for sin. The Christian Right's insistence that its view of the family is biblical and divinely mandated is based on this notion that the patriarchal family is an ordinance of creation instituted by God.'²¹

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of the Victorian nuclear family providing a place of refuge for the well- paid male breadwinner, women and children no longer needing to contribute to the labour force of the household, the home being a sacred space

¹⁸ Countryman, p. 234.

¹⁹ Ruether, 2000, p. 225

²⁰ Ruether, 2000, p. 226

²¹ Ruether, 2000, p. 228.

separated from the defilement of 'the world'. This space was provided by the Angel of the House, the dependant innocent female who remained untainted by the ways of the world. The 20th century saw the position of women working outside the home fluctuate depending on economic need – during the two world wars women were allowed into the public world of work but expected to return to their rightful place in the home as the men returned from war. Following the rise of the civil Rights movements, including feminism, in the second half of the century and the economic need of many for a two-wage household a new pattern of partnership was demanded.

Ruether points out that a patriarchal family whether in antiquity or today is constructed by humans, not divinely mandated as an order of creation, and that it needs to be challenged. She states:

These family systems, then, not only are not of God, but partake of demonic distortions that impede justice and wellbeing for many. They manifest the powers and principalities of an alienated "world." This judgement of family as alien to God and contrary to redemptive community underlay the antifamily tradition of the Jesus movement and the early church. Today, as in the early church, we need to realize that becoming a redemptive community means reimagining the family. The church, God's messianic people, is a new family, an alternative, liberated community of chosen kin through which we can taste the messianic banquet....²²

The demonic distortions of these family systems, giving authority and power to the male, contrary to the vision of messianic banquet can be seen as manifested in the levels of abuse found in the domestic home mostly levelled by the male against the female and the children, 90 to 99% of adult victims being women for whom the home is a hostile environment. In 90% of cases of domestic violence children are in the same or the adjacent room and will be seriously harmed by witnessing and living with domestic violence even if not physically harmed themselves, although 30% of men who abuse their wives also physically abuse their children. The extent of domestic violence is hard to

determine as much remains hidden, a woman on average being subjected to attack 27 times before reporting it with only 2% of violent attacks on women reported to the police. In my home-town, where the police have addressed this issue enforcing a Zero Tolerance initiative towards domestic violence, they attend an average of 10 incidents a day and have 10,000 recorded victims from a population of 180,000. Domestic violence against women is widespread, is historically pervasive and crosses all cultures and classes.²³ Patterns of abuse include: isolation, distorted perspective, exhaustion, degradation, the enforcing of trivial demands, threats, displays of total power and occasional indulgences, exactly the same patterns found in the abuse of political prisoners, regarded in that case as a violation of human rights. In the case of violence in the family the personal can also be seen as the political and the political as personal in the tolerance and justification of the subjection of women to the male economy.

The religious ideology that underpins cultures is being criticised for giving authority to the torture of females within the private sphere of the home and raises questions about the validity of traditional Christian theology for the well being of women.²⁴ Domestic violence perhaps encapsulates the destructive nature of a theology of atonement, resting on the assumption that suffering is redemptive, punishment necessary and sacrifice of the order of holiness justifying Jesus' death. Jesus died to reconcile sinful humans to God, or to be more accurate, Jesus, the innocent victim died to atone for the sin of disobedience, the acquiring by humans of the knowledge of good and evil, thereby making them capable of ethical decision making. This sin was committed by the woman, Mythologised as Eve, who

²² Ruether, 2000 p. 229.

²³ St. Helens & Knowsley Working Together For Safer, Healthier Families, *Domestic Violence Prevention Toolkit*, St. Helens MBC, 2000.

²⁴ See for instance: Potter Engels, Mary, *Historical Theology and Violence against Women: Unearthing a Popular Tradition of Just Battery*, in Carol J. Adams & Marie M. Fortune (Eds), *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995).

carried with her out of the garden of innocence the man she abused by tempting him to disobedience too: woman, thus brought about the inequality of the sexes and her own position of insubordination. Women are proved to be of an inferior nature to man and need to be under the authority of the male species. Women therefore have two masters to answer to for bringing sin into the world: God and Man. And if God can demand the suffering and death of his son, suffering is of the order of being human and divinely ordained, especially the suffering afforded to women, firmly established as biblically ordained at the outset of the canon of sacred scriptures.

In her study of the history of wife beating Mary Potter Engel makes the connections between the ideology of gender inequality and the practice of violence against women.

She argues that a Christianity for today calls for the

...rejection of all theories of inequality. As long as we do not root out the contemporary versions of the stereotypes of women as Gateway to Ruin, Temptress, Adulteress, Deceiver, and Shrew, we will not break with the just battery tradition, for there will always be one just cause for battery of wives: insubordination.²⁵

However, if Jesus' death was not necessary for our redemption why did he die and how are we redeemed from the evil surrounding us in the world? The theologies of Jon Sobrino, writing in the context of the poor and oppressed and William R. Jones whose concerns are those of the ethnic minorities are put forward as countering a patriarchal theology of suffering. But it is the feminist theologian, Carter Heyward who is cited as the most radical in opposing the sacral nature of suffering, proposing that talk of a sadistic god is blasphemy. Jesus' death was not willed by God but the inevitable result of a radical thinker who challenged the societal injustice surrounding him. Humanity does not need to be redeemed from an original sin but redemption comes from being in loving relationships

Carlson Brown, Joanne, Bohn, Carole, R., (Eds), *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse A Feminist Critique*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1989).

with god and with one another that has the power to liberate people from oppression.

Brown says:

If in that liberation process there is suffering it will be because people with power choose to use their power to resist and oppose the human claim to passionate and free life. Those who seek redemption must dare to live their lives in intimate, immediate love relationships with each other, remembering times when we were not slaves.²⁶

In such a paradigm of redemption as the choosing of life, the power of death is overcome, resurrection is lived in this life and the archetype of this way of being is Jesus. In the words of Brown and Parker, 'Jesus climbed out of the grave in the Garden of Gethsemane when he refused to abandon his commitment to the truth even though his enemies threatened him with death. On Good Friday, the Resurrected One was Crucified.'²⁷

People who survive political torture and those who challenge oppressive structures are the ones who have something to live for, some deep seated strength to counteract the violence being perpetrated on their bodies and psyches. Carole Bohn believes that in order to experience the resurrected life, to counter the evil that is inherent in received cultural norms including domestic violence, to change the balance of power that favours dominance and subordination, the theology of ownership that pervades Christianity has to be challenged. Defining worth on the basis of sex or gender would need to give way to relationships that rely on the concept of responsible adulthood in which all persons were equal.²⁸

Changing the balance of power of course is not easy but a necessary move to promote the safety of women and children in their homes. Rita Nakashima Brock,²⁹ drawing on the

²⁵ Engel, p. 258.

²⁶ Brown and Parker, in Brown and Bohn, p. 27.

²⁷ Brown and Parker, in Brown and Bohn, p. 28.

²⁸ Bohn, Carole R., *Dominion to Rule: Consequences of a Theology of Ownership*, in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland, Ohio, The Pilgrim Press, 1989)

²⁹ Brock, Rita Nakashima, *Ending Innocence and Nurturing Willfulness*, in Adams & Fortune, 1995, pp.70-83.

experience of Asian American women in their multiple oppressions of race, economics and gender, and her experience in dealing with abused children looks to the Asian tradition of respect for the 'wisdom and sophistication of age.' This she claims enables them to be 'more' than the politics of their lives, to choose to live despite the forces that would destroy them. Brock contends that in order to be empowered we need to outgrow our innocence and nurture our wilfulness, contrary to what is expected of women. By innocence she means, 'the sense that our actions are not wilfully chosen, that we are doing what we do by instinct, by our very inborn nature, or because we do not know anything else.'³⁰ Innocence, she says encourages victimization in the face of evil. Brock points to Nel Noddings' contention that for women to be seen as good it is necessary to conform to their God given female nurturing and passive nature that cancels out agency and power. Women who consciously choose to ignore this disempowerment, emulating the ethical thinking of men, using their own agency and power, are classed as unfeminine and bad but by conforming to her role in the domestic sphere women are good and safe; those violated in families of course tell a different story. Noddings advocates the redefining of evil in non-dualistic terms so that evil can be seen as 'whatever reinforces intractable pain. ... evil is what creates separation from relationships of love and nurture. ... three things - helplessness, pain and separation-define evil.'³¹ The redemptive task, according to Brock can then be seen as the promotion of ethical actions, through wilful behaviour and rightful use of power, in order to alleviate or prevent pain and enhance relationships. Recognising that we are all capable of both good and evil she argues that the systems of abuse that inflict helplessness, pain and separation are maintained by a parallel system of domination and oppression. In such a system where those in power define goodness and the victims

³⁰ Brock, pp. 77-78

³¹ Brock, 1995, p. 79.

of abuse are innocent and passive, the victims can call forth outrage, compassion and justice but the abusive behaviour is not addressed. Brock maintains that innocence, that autonomous acceptance of the status quo, makes for passive scapegoats and has to be rejected and grown out of by nurturing willfulness. She suggests that Sara Ruddick's expose of positive parenting that she calls maternal thinking could be a model for the nurturing of willfulness. To be aware of the ambiguity of good and evil in ourselves and others, whether personal relationships or political powers, to encourage personal responsibility for one's actions, and to be empowered to assert one's will in disobeying oppressive authority and systems will resist evil that is manifest as helplessness, pain and separation. Acting on the knowledge that one has power, to be able to respond to the spiritual power that lies in our deep seated desire for mutuality, a power that can be seen as the power of God incarnate in each one, is what resists evil and makes it possible to live in hope. We are born vulnerable to the network of relationships in family and society that can make or break us. We need to empower all to become moral agents able to discern and to care about what kind of relationality is life giving and what brings death, so that in our actions and solidarity with one another in the face of suffering we 'wisefully and wilfully participate in love and justice. And so, in losing our innocence we gain our hope.'

³² Brock underscores the theology of Sobrino, Jones and Heyward in rejecting any notion that Jesus' violent death was to save us from the wrath of God but maintains that Jesus died 'because the political, patriarchal powers of his day saw the danger of his life and his movement to their systems of oppression.'³³ Jesus in his commitment to the integrity of his desires, in the totality of the incarnation of the divine, died because of the wrath of the religious and political community, and in refusing to live a life of innocence he showed us

³² Brock, Rita Nakashima, *Losing Your Innocence But Not Your Hope*, in Maryanne Stevens (Ed), *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol* (Mahwah, N...J: Paulist Press, 1993), p 51.

the way to resurrection. We are called to be this resurrection community, modelled on the early Christian movement that refuses to give up on a vision of life sustaining relationships that pave the way for systems of love and justice, Brock calling Jesus 'politically savvy.'³⁴ Salvation then comes from the influence of a community that has the courage to face the devils inherent in relationships that cause helplessness, pain and separation, a community that is also politically savvy and is willing to take the risks necessary to keep hope alive. It calls for us to lose our innocence and nurture our willfulness in order for us to be 'able to laugh forever.'³⁵

Underlying this need to lose our innocence is the need to claim our distinct sexuality and subjectivity, to discern the answer to the question 'Who am I?' from a position of choice based on freedom rather than a coercive givenness.

Throughout the history of Christianity, except perhaps at the time of its inception, the power of the male in hierarchical family structures has been all-important. Gender roles have been integral to the maintenance of the position of the church in society that relies on essentialist thinking about gender. In recent times following the impact of feminism and the changing situation and self confidence of the homosexual community in secular society the church has found it necessary to address the issues raised concerning gender. The result has been, particularly within the Catholic Church to reiterate to both the gay and lesbian communities and to women the traditional views and essentialist stance, particularly with regard to the role of the female. Women were recently encouraged to emulate Mary (in the traditional understanding of her as innocent virgin mother, not as single mother) whilst those not conforming to the binary gender roles and the single were told to remain celibate. The threat of change of course is not without reason as gender

³³ Brock, 1993, p. 49.

³⁴ Brock, 1993, p. 43.

impacts not only on personal identity but also has a political sway. And if we are called to be politically savvy, gender construction is an area of family life that needs to be examined in its ability to maintain innocence. Within the context of the Western Christian nuclear family gender delineates the boundaries of roles, behaviour and the power systems that supports the status quo. According to social constructivists we come to our understanding of our sexuality through cultural influences that define our desires and our behaviour as man or woman. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, 'one is not born, one becomes a woman', biology determining one's sex but culture determining one's sexuality and one's subjectivity, that perception of who I am in relation to others and to the divine. Subjectivity is created by the powerful influence of the symbolic realm that affords value through the artefacts of culture, that is language, art, architecture, music, science, technology and myth and perhaps we might add fashion. Braidotti³⁶ points to Georges Dumezil's contention that the administration of this symbolic system has been carried by the institutions of the church, the military and the university, three areas that for centuries excluded women thus establishing a social order that was the domain of the masculine. Much work has been done in the area of gender studies to uncover the restrictive nature of the role afforded to women and to redefine subjectivity in light of changing social mores. Rosi Braidotti has integrated much of this thinking and put forward the term 'Nomadic Subjects' as an alternative theoretical figuration or style of thought for subjectivity in the postmodern era that she says moves beyond the 'phallogocentric vision of the subject...(providing) a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity.'³⁷ Braidotti points to the change in social relations following the decline of heavy manufacturing as the basis of economy in the West and the dependence on economic

³⁵ Brock, 1993, p. 51.

structures based on service and information industries entailing a redistribution of labour worldwide. This has led to a 'decline of traditional sociosymbolic systems based on the state, the family, and masculine authority'. She sees the need to 'redefine a transmobile materialistic theory of feminist subjectivity that is committed to working within the parameters of the postmodern predicament, without romanticizing it but also without nostalgia for an allegedly more wholesome past.'³⁸ This would need to encompass the diverse embodied experience of women within the changing social milieu. She states:

The body, or the embodiment of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological. ... in other words, feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with radical rejection of essentialism.³⁹

The nomad does not operate from a place of innocence, the autonomous acceptance of the status quo, but from a 'kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. ... It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling'⁴⁰

Braidotti⁴¹ charts the development in thinking on the theory of gender. From Simone de Beauvoir's initial exploration of the concept that laid the ground for the second wave of the feminist movement in the 60's she plots the struggle to free women as the second sex from the situation of otherness in the male symbolic economy of the social, economic, intellectual and political world and free themselves from the authority of father or husband, taking on a discrete identity. Questioning the authority of the male brought into

³⁶ Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects*, New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press 1994, p. 266.

³⁷ Braidotti, p. 1.

³⁸ Braidotti, p. 2.

³⁹ Braidotti, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Braidotti, p. 5.

⁴¹ Braidotti, ch. 15, pp. 258-280.

focus the role of the family in prescribing women's subjectivity and gender identity that led to dualistically prescribed roles functioning as the 'political economy of heterosexuality'.⁴²

Citing Gayle Rubin's expository of Levi –Strauss's work on kinship structures

Braidotti points out that women are imperative as objects of exchange in the patriarchal homosocial economy that ensures the authority of the father, women taking on the father's name, the family being 'the power unit that seals the wealth of men and establishes heterosexuality as the dominant political economy for both sexes. As such, heterosexuality is the institution that supports the gender system.'⁴³ Braidotti points to a movement in the 90's towards the idea of gender as a network of relations such as Adrienne Rich had suggested, otherness being seen as positive, difference and equality being part of the same spectrum. In considering the development of gender theories Teresa de Lauretis has coined the term 'the technology of gender', purporting that the

process of constructing the subject produces such categories as: men, women, heterosexual, pervert etc. etc., and intersects with other normative variables –such as race and class – to produce a formidable power system that constructs socially normal subjects. As a consequence, she calls for feminist to destabilize the normativity of the dominant forms of sexed identity, and to find new definitions for the female subject⁴⁴

Butler suggests that new definitions of the female subject will result in a range of genders that displays the 'multiplicity of differences that constitutes the subject.'⁴⁵

Gender then in contemporary theories can be seen as process and technology that finds its expression in the performance of differing genders at both the personal and political level. By acting out a particular way of expressing sexuality, continuously repeated gender performance is powerful in terms of reinforcing personal identity and in reinforcing the social norm and precluding difference. When the binary oppositions inherent in

⁴² Braidotti, p. 267.

⁴³ Braidotti, p. 268.

⁴⁴ Braidotti, p. 275.

⁴⁵ Braidotti, p. 275.

heterosexuality prescribe performance, identity is seen as stable and can be used as a tool for social control, underpinning both patriarchy and capitalism⁴⁶, but will not reflect the reality of the multiplicity of gender identities, marginalizing those who do not conform. However, the presence of savvy, nomadic people performing a range of gender identities, challenges the innocent acceptance of essentialist notions of identity and gender relations and confronts both the power systems that maintain that essentialism and the integrity of transmitting an imposed norm through the artefacts of culture.

Any embodied context for sacramentality, the celebration of the divine in our midst, would need to encompass the wide range of embodied identities reflected in gender diversity that are presently demonised by the Christian Right but whose Human Rights are beginning to be upheld in National Constitutions and whose identities are supported by the unearthing of genealogies of diversely gendered peoples and their value to society. If gender is seen as process rather than essential givenness the role of the family is crucial in promoting difference. Gender and family cannot be separated; gender is at the basis of the family structures passed down through the generations in the interaction of relationships where we are given the answer to the question 'who do you say that I am?' In a Christian family that answer is couched in the faith belief of the divine nature of the historical Jesus and our own relationship with the divine, beliefs reiterated through the religious symbols by which they are transmitted. Feminist reflections on family and the growth to maturity might pose the question: 'how do we nurture savvy disciples willing to lose their innocence and sustain willfulness? In a postmodern world Christians are challenged to re-assess the interaction of relationships, imperfection, and embodiment

⁴⁶ Baird, Vanessa, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Sexual Diversity* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2001), p. 77.

and gender in the family in order that it may be a positive and safe space in which to reflect the reality of the diverse incarnations of god in the world.

In reimagining family Rosemary Radford Ruether calls for 'the articulation of alternative values that promote a more authentic ethic of human relationships,'⁴⁷ so that all will flourish. Ruether points out that in reality there are many patterns of family that includes:

... the single householder; the gay or lesbian couple, including partners raising children by adoption, former marriages, or artificial insemination; the single parent, male or female; the two-earner heterosexual couple; the three-or four-generation family; families blended through divorce and remarriage; and cohabiting partnerships of two, three, or more people that may or may not include a sexual pair.⁴⁸

The celebration and affirming of all these relationships would require new rites, indicating an expanded idea of sacramental celebration that has the potential to be more inclusive. Recognising that all relationships can be sinful if abusive and uncaring of the other, Ruether suggests for relationships to flourish we need to develop an ethic of mutuality rooted in the quality of friendship.

I suggest therefore that rather than using the concept of family as an embodied context for sacramentality we might explore using friendship, a context that could include family bonds but that extends beyond what for many is an abusive or exclusive parameter for relationships. However, friendship, too is not without its problems given the Greco Roman tradition of women not being capable of being classed as friends but this belief has been challenged by feminist writers who have uncovered a hidden tradition of female friendship not previously acknowledged in the public realm but that might have the potential to reflect a more inclusive, diverse collection of savvy disciples who, like Jesus, have lost their innocence and learnt how to laugh forever.

⁴⁷ Ruether, 2000, p. 207.

As stated at the beginning the present task in my research is to examine the way that sacramental celebration of the presence of the divine in our lives is experienced through symbolic representation and to what extent that symbolism reflects an ethos that upholds the integrity of women. Women's subjectivity seems to be bounded by the patriarchal mindset that maintains a stance of complementarity reflected in the religious symbolic, utilised in sacramental liturgies and upholding ancient family structures that are being questioned. A way beyond this might be in Ruether's proposition that for relationships to flourish we need to develop an ethic of mutuality rooted in the quality of friendship and Brock's call to nurture savvy willfull disciples. Both of these view point toward a need to re-examine the beliefs transmitted by the symbols used in sacramental liturgies taking into consideration findings in the analysis of gender studies. Accommodating its impact on the effect of the symbols used in sacramental liturgy in relation to the formation of women's subjectivity and re-examining the relevance of the ancient familial imagery might support a fresh understanding of the divine/human relationship in which women, like Jesus, are not innocent and helpless but capable of being 'politically savvy,'⁴⁹ active and willfull participants in the divine economy enacted and celebrated in sacramental rites.

⁴⁸ Ruether, 2000, p. 212.

⁴⁹ Brock, 1993, p. 43.

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