

The **MAST** Journal

Mercy International Theology from the Pacific

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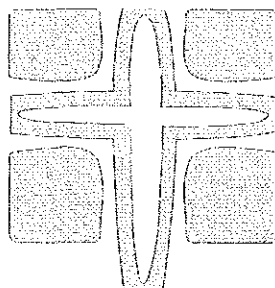
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Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy

What liberation happens for Mercy Sisters of the Pacific when they acknowledge the rights of aboriginal peoples, indigenous Maoris, and vowed members who come from tribal families? For caucasian Mercy Sisters in the Americas, commitment to the cause of women is strengthened by affirming the rights of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and other communities of color. Mercies insist that the dignity of all persons be revered. At the same time, justice cannot be achieved without empathy.

Ancient societies defined law as the guarantee that the rights of the weak would not be crushed by the power of the strong. United States civil rights legislation in the 1960s protected vulnerable minorities from oppression by the stronger majority. But there is a conceptual leap when it comes to religious women. If women with vows do not pay income tax in the U.S.A., do they still have a right as citizens to resist discriminatory treatment in church and society? Canonists and civil lawyers are confused. What is the relation of vows to civil rights? Some women are not sure if the vowed life is a "better way" or a spiritualized substitute for the rights of citizenship. Thus, they fall silent when they experience unfair treatment as ministers in the church, employees in the workplace, or members of an order.

If the vowed life is proposed as an alternative way to reach full personhood, can gospel-measured maturity reach fullness without an exercise of civil rights? A quiet tension underlies this notion of maturity, ambiguity over whether we are citizens of earth or citizens of heaven. Did we leave our civil rights at the door when we entered the convent? Another confusing issue: While a Mercy may be a citizen "outside" in public, to what category does she belong "inside" religious life?

This question affects our assumptions about community governance. When a superior governs, does she speak to subjects who retain their status from ancient times as chattel, minor children, or slaves who lacked rights of full personhood? Or has vowed women's status caught up with western democratic society, which accords all women the rights of full person, citizen, and party to a contract? Irresolution about her legal status, with competing cultural identities as citizen and sister, impacts a vowed woman's ability to mobilize her energies for "the service of the poor, the sick and the ignorant."

We might consider women with vows comparable to indigenous populations in a European-originated church. An analogous process of liberation is needed. Women with vows are fully vested with human rights defined under international law. They lay claim to civil rights as citizens. They demand recognition of their canonical rights within the ecclesial structure. "The vowed life," with its centuries-long affirmation of the autonomy and dignity of a woman, acquires new liberating force in church and society, no matter what ethnicity is a woman's heritage. But that liberating force has effect only to the degree that a woman with vows knows, and then claims her human, civil, and canonical rights. Education about women's rights belongs to any curriculum of theological education. A woman ignorant of her rights should not take vows. A superior without knowledge of members' rights should not govern.



Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., Editor

Editorial Introduction

Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M.

Last weekend, I read the proofs of volume 1, *Finding the Treasure*, of Sandra Schneiders' new two-volume work *Religious Life in a New Millennium*. She continually reiterates in this work that she is speaking of the specific cultural context of North America. Likewise, however, she points out that one of the characteristics of this lifeform called religious life, which she isolates, namely solidarity with those who struggle, who will find a unique expression in the different life contexts in which women religious seek to live in fidelity to the gospel. Mercy religious life is lived in different global contexts and does find different expressions in those contexts; and yet from these, we can speak to one another in a way which invites deeper reflection on this Mercy life in each particular situation. This edition of MAST has its cultural location in the Pacific and includes articles from Tonga, New Zealand [*wahine* Maori and *pakeha*] and Australia.

The articles were written toward the close of 1999 and some, therefore, address challenges that the year of Jubilee held out to us as Sisters of Mercy, Christian women within the Pacific context. All, however, could be placed under the banner of the call to Jubilee in this year 2000, when not only the Church, but also Mercy International invites us to respond from the depths of compassionate hearts to the global call to justice, forgiveness of debts, liberation, homecoming, and sabbath rest.

The two opening articles take us immediately into our own context of Mercy religious life and there ask the question of our solidarity or lack of solidarity across cultures. Tui Cadigan's "The Effects of Change in Religious Life for *Wahine* Maori," asks challenging questions of the renewal of women's religious life in New Zealand, pointing to its failure to allow for a different type of renewal necessary for *wahine* Maori members of religious congregations. While addressed to a specific situation, Cadigan's questions touch the foundational issue of the cre-

ation of "the other." This must continually challenge each of us in the many situations of our lives, but is particularly relevant to Mercy religious life. Who are those who have been marginalized, made into "the other" and how have we silenced their voices and stifled their being and becoming? And this particularly in our own midst? Senolita Vakata, in "Inculturation within Myself and Religious Life in the Tongan Culture," uses current theories and models of contemporary missiologists and anthropologists to examine her own experience in Mercy religious life in Tonga. She brings this into dialogue with the Johannine prologue as a conclusion of her theological reflection.

Conscious of these cross-cultural issues, Kathleen Rushton, in "The Woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42)—Celebrating Mercy Women and Culture," addresses the challenge of culture which is raised by Cadigan and Vakata from the point of view of a *pakeha* or European New Zealand contextualization. She explores the story of the woman of Samaria of John 4 in light of the experience of the multicultural gathering, Mercy Pacific, in Kaikoura, Aotearoa New Zealand in January 1999. She raises the question of not only gender, but dominant and minority culture and the challenges that these issues bring to Mercy women in the Pacific region. She reflects on this through the lens of the Samaritan woman's story, a story of a woman from the minority culture. Liz Dowling was also a participant in the Mercy Pacific gathering. Initially she places her exploration of "The Absence of Women in John 21," in the context of the struggles in relation to authority and leadership in the contemporary church, especially as these relate to women.

Like Rushton, however, Dowling also indicates the relevance of the Johannine women's stories for the multicultural context of the Pacific and for Mercy in the Pacific region.

As Australians look to a new millennium, as theologians seek to articulate an Australian spirituality, and as Sisters of Mercy participate in national projects, three key issues emerge over and over again: Aboriginal Reconciliation, East Timor, and environmental sustainability. It is these which Anne Tormey has isolated in her article, "End of a Century: Dawn of a Century," and she elaborates more fully on the third in light of her situation in southwestern Western Australia. Her concluding question, "What does it mean to be a Sister of Mercy in the face of these local and global concerns?" can reverberate around the global contexts of Mercy.

The second of these burning concerns is addressed from the compassionate heart of Mercy of Veronica Lawson as she introduces us to Jose, Ellya, Sancho, and Nicholau, East Timorese refugees who are part of her life and the life of the Ballarat Sisters of Mercy. She locates her reflections on the experience of these refugees and the engagement that their plight calls forth in Sisters of Mercy within an Australian context, within the biblical call to jubilee—"East Timor: A Call to Jubilee." The invitation in her paper is one which can touch the hearts of each of her readers and engage reflection on our own situations and the call to jubilee within them.

This jubilee call is approached from quite a different perspective by Patricia Fox, "A Reading of the Vatican's Official Catechetical Text, God, the Father of Mercy," in which she sets her analysis of the catechetical document, *God the Father of Mercy*, within the context of a recently published survey in Australia on women's participation in the Catholic Church and the call of many participants in this re-

search for more inclusive language and symbols for divinity. Her concluding section is of particular relevance to Sisters of Mercy as she invites us to relieve Mary of the burden of divinity and to rightfully restore the title of "Mother of Mercy" to God's self.

Almost in response to the call for new images of divinity and the search for these within the scriptures, Alice Sinnott's, "A Wise Woman or Personified Wisdom?" addresses the question as to the relationship between the wise woman in Prov 31:10-31 and Wisdom Personified. The figure of Wisdom, personified female in the Wisdom Literature, is one which is capturing the religious imagination of women in today's church and especially women religious who are struggling to find a new imagination which values the female. While Sinnott does not critically address this question in her article, it will be of interest to those who are searching to know divine wisdom and to welcome her into their lives.

And in the genre of the wisdom tradition, Paula Smith, "Memories as Mystery," invites us into a process of re-membling as she traces a memory from her early Novitiate days. As this memory is brought into dialogue with contemporary reflection and scholarship, we as readers are drawn into the questions the memory and the reflection raise for a contemporary living of Mercy religious life. We thank the MAST editorial board for this opportunity to share the scriptural and theological scholarship of some Mercy women in the Pacific in a more international context in the hope that it will stimulate global reflections on mercy and that we can share these with one another in the many forums which are emerging in our Mercy network



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The Effects of Change in Religious Life for *Wahine* Maori

Tui H. L. Cadigan, R.S.M.

This document is an extract from my Masters thesis titled, "The Indigenization of Religious Life for *Wahine* Maori in the Context of Aotearoa." It is a Maori critique of the continuing presumption by the dominant *pakeha* culture of their right to interpret religious life for and on behalf of indigenous women in Aotearoa.

The Second Vatican Council convoked by Pope John XXIII was intended to allow a little fresh air to blow through the life and times of the Roman Catholic Church. As the council documents began to roll off the Vatican press, it became apparent that the pent up winds of change were building to gale force, reaching out to all the musty recesses of the church, including religious life. The Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), was promulgated on 28 October 1965.¹ Although the title may have indicated a level of caution by the word "appropriate," the reality was a combination of excitement and terror.

In a lifestyle that had for so long been defined by Canon Law and lived primarily according to the theology derived from the same, change for the most part appears to have been reasonably swift and dramatic. The mandate issued in *Perfectae Caritatis* stated that the renewal should

involve two simultaneous processes, "a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life," and "a return to the original inspiration of a given congregation with an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times."²

Religious congregations in Aotearoa, particularly women's congregations, undertook this renewal with energy and honesty.³ They embarked upon a program

church and the world blurred. Over the next twenty-five to thirty years, much of what typified religious life ceased and was taken over by laity or was at least accessible to both sectors.

The consequences of renewal impacted differently on different congregations.⁵ There was variance also from community to community, with degrees of change ranging from extensive to minimal. Two distinct

The identity crisis religious were experiencing was magnified as their role in the church and the world blurred. Over the next twenty-five to thirty years, much of what typified religious life ceased and was taken over by laity or was at least accessible to both sectors.

to reexamine and update the structures that governed them—the constitutions, style of dress, prayer life, community life, involvement in ministry, ongoing education—in fact, every facet of their lifestyle. The changed role of the laity in the church instigated by *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, impacted dramatically on religious life.⁴ The identity crisis religious were experiencing was magnified as their role in the

sides to renewal emerged. On one side, turmoil and fear fueled a crisis of identity, changed meaning, and provoked an exodus of members. On the other side, there was excitement at the prospect of rejuvenating the original spirit to impact on the present reality and joy in the restoration of personal identity, individuality, and opportunities for spiritual and personal development. The prolific writings of those who analyzed the issues

attempted to provide some understanding of what characterized the new religious life. Relevance, freedom, uncertainty and chaos were identified as major contributors.

Prior to Vatican II, the identity, status, and role of religious women was obvious in the church and in the world. *Lumen Gentium* shattered the understanding that religious were an elite group in the church, called to some form of superior perfection within the vowed state.⁶ At the time of renewal, religious women were in the unusual situation of holding positions of power and status not normally

subordinate status in the internal life of their congregations.

Of particular importance to this thesis is the fact that the renewal of religious life allowed for reclamation of personal and cultural identity, reestablishing of family links, acceptance of diversity, and recognition of individual talents. Nevertheless, the effects of renewal were only a partial blessing for *wahine* Maori. On one hand, like many of their *pakeha* sisters, *wahine* Maori in religious life welcomed the opportunity to reclaim their personal identity and reestablish links with *whanau*. Unfortunately, *pakeha* totally controlled the power

recognized me as truly me, the Maori, but I stood in this world as truly me the Maori. I never forgot who I was." "My *whanau* was the dominant enhancement of my religious life as a Maori." "No one wanted to know I was Maori. They were happy for me to be a Sister, but the very mention of anything to do with Maori and there was eye rolling and obvious discomfort." "It was a waste of money doing renewal that made me think about cultural and spiritual identity when on my return it was all ignored. I felt people wanted me to be how I was before."

Wahine Maori were (and still are) affected by assimilative processes that block their living fully as Maori and *wahine*, thereby preventing their potential to inculturate their congregational charism as Maori for Maori. It is possible to argue that the priority to address the needs of all sisters and the levels of crisis being experienced in light of such uncertainty and insecurity meant that it was extremely likely that the primary focus would be on the dominant group. It is also natural to expect that in crisis mode people act according to their usual inclinations—in this case *pakeha* norms. What must also be considered is that those who held leadership positions during this period would most likely have been experiencing turmoil similar to that of other members of their congregations.

Gerald Arbuckle is critical of religious leadership, arguing that it is seduced by the individualism and materialism of its culture and provides a similar model for fellow religious.⁷ Accepting that

They were happy for me to be a Sister, but the very mention of anything to do with Maori and there was eye rolling and obvious discomfort.

enjoyed by their Sisters in secular society. Sisters ran hospitals, schools, orphanages, and hostels at a time when men held comparable positions in the secular world. They owned and operated businesses, while secular society still tended to confine women to roles that complemented the positions of power and control held by men. The difficulties experienced by religious women in their relationships with some church hierarchy and local clergy is acknowledged here. The contradiction was that, while many of these women held considerable external professional power, the hierarchical functioning in religious life forced them to assume a

to determine the new structures and the processes for the functioning of religious life.

The invisibility of *wahine* Maori in the church, society, and the old structure of religious life may be said to have influenced *pakeha* by setting a precedent of ignoring their cultural, spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs. When asked for an indication of the value placed on their being Maori by their congregations, the following statements were given by Maori religious: "I brought with me a *whanau* / *whanau*ngatanga / *whakapapa* / *Reo* / *karakia* / *karanga* / *tangi* / *aroha* / *pono* / *tika* discipline from home / order / responsibility a *wai-rua* / a *tinana*." "No one truly

the conditions mentioned above were operable in part or in full, it is the contention of this paper that a unique opportunity was missed. *Pakeha* were able to act unchallenged because they not only filled all the leadership roles, but as the major cultural group, they assumed the right to interpret a norm of religious life articulated solely through their cultural, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical norms. Maori had nowhere to channel their concerns regarding operating processes. Any possibility of indigenization of religious life was snatched away when the new constitutions and directives from chapters confirmed the renewed style for living religious life. Moreover, although levels of chaos remained, the institutional need for structure and order resulted in what could arguably be called premature decisions.

Clearly, there were reasons why Maori did not achieve cultural autonomy as a result of *Perfectae Caritatis*. First of all, Maori did not have sufficient numbers to impact on discussion or election outcomes as did, for instance, the Irish in some congregations. Secondly, their individual status mostly was as junior members of congregations; away from the seats of power. Thirdly, religious life was merely reflecting the attitudes about Maori held by society in general. Fourthly, and possibly most importantly, the years of training that concentrated on removing links with culture, identity, family, and spirituality rendered them powerless in the new environment. The strength of Maori is derived from links to

Atua, *whenua* and *tangata* through *whanau*, *hapu* and *Iwi*, the source of *tapu*. *Tapu* provides the *mana* to act in a given situation. My research suggests that these connections had been severed and replaced with the artificial concepts of religious family, the subculture of religious life and the charism or founding spirit of the congregation. Thus, when the opportunity presented itself for renewal, the elements of the replacement culture were insufficient to empower Maori religious to achieve some liberation from the cultural oppression imposed on them.

Every religious congregation that came to Aotearoa was already imbued with a culture and spirituality from elsewhere, including the one congregation founded here, born of the generosity of a French woman, Susanne Aubert. The relationship paralleled that of the indissoluble link between Christianity and the cultural norms of the colonial missionaries. This resulted in the two being taught to Maori as one. I suggest that a similar practice existed for religious life. The cultures of all the founders of religious congregations in Aotearoa were European and so were the models of religious life that they brought with them. Formation in religious life has been, and continues to be as much about induction into *pakeha* cultural values as into the following of Christ according to the gospel. It is my contention that the changes to religious life since Vatican II have continued to be according to *pakeha* cultural norms, this time with a fair dose of North American influence.

Some of the essential influences on renewed religious life and their relevance, or lack of relevance, to *wahine* Maori will be considered.

One characteristic of *pakeha* culture is the emphasis on the individual and individuality. It was the latter that the restrictions of convent life so stringently stifled.⁸ The impact of renewal was to open the way for reclamation and recognition of the uniqueness and talents of individuals. The shift to a more individual oriented religious life had the capacity to free *pakeha* from a lifestyle dominated by the needs of the community. Rather than dealing with one conglomerate being named "Congregation," personalities were now able to emerge and assert themselves. While there have been gains for religious women through these changes, the emphasis on individuality and individualism is in danger of being a mere reflection of European/North American middle-class values. Gerald Arbuckle warns that encouraging individualism will result in weakening the bonds and sense of common good of the group.⁹ There is a need for religious women to have a raised awareness of the sources of their renewed vision for religious life.

Religious women's congregations committed themselves to the spirit of *Perfectae Caritatis* by a return to their founding spirit and study of the church's social teachings, scriptures, and active involvement in justice issues. As concerns related to the restructuring of religious life increased, written material increased dramatically, providing

a multitude of opinions on community living, ministry, prayer, spirituality, formation, and governance structures. The authors of many of these works presented solutions implied to be universal from the perspective of their North American culture. On the local scene, the material was read with interest and enthusiasm, but largely uncritically. This may have been because of a total lack of local material or it may have stemmed from acceptance of the fact that the subculture of religious life could be interpreted in the same way for all religious everywhere.

Two areas that have impacted dramatically on religious life in the last thirty years are Vatican II (already referred to) and the feminist movement. The phase of the feminist movement pertinent to this paper is the so-called second wave, which has affected the relationship of religious sisters in congregations, community, church, and secular society. In the struggle for equality, religious women appeared as exceptions to the outside world. They ran businesses successfully without the assistance of men. Many congregations can attest to the levels of interference endured from bishops and clergy over the years. They held positions of authority in schools, hospitals, and orphanages at a time when society generally denied secular women the same opportunities.¹⁰

Religious life prior to Vatican II was interpreted by the church as a superior calling for women. Sisters had a status of being neither ordained nor lay, attaching to them some sort of

middle way. However, *Lumen Gentium* ruled this out, and with the release of *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People) much of what had constituted the apostolate of religious was opened up to the laity. This added another issue to the chaos of renewal.

In the search for personal identity that preceded the call for renewal, the issue of equality for the female person found support in religious congregations. The movement for women's liberation, deemed to be non-hierarchical, held to a philosophy that men had benefited from women's oppression politically, socially, emotionally, and economically. A huge collection of writings on the topic of feminism were generated, many by religious women. Certain aspects might arguably be credited with causing religious to advocate feminism. Firstly, the new freedom to read and study Scripture encouraged the development of a personal theology, influenced by congregational charism and Catholic social teachings. Secondly, in the 1970s and 1980s, social analysis seminars critical of the distribution of societal power and wealth provided religious with another analytical tool to examine societal, church, and congregational structures. Thirdly, numbers of religious engaged in further education were exposed to new levels of prejudice and oppression not experienced in the isolation of convent life.¹¹

The internal turmoil brought to religious life and the church by Vatican II produced a legacy of uncertainty and confusion.¹²

Religious women, like their secular sisters, sought to critique and challenge the structures that oppressed them through energetic and honest discernment, aided by the aspects mentioned above and empowered by solidarity and the development of feminism.

The feminist movement had adherents and adversaries in religious life. Internal issues arose over the rejection of specifics, such as male language used in community prayer and liturgy and pressure to find appropriate feminine processes for use at congregational meetings, chapters, and celebrations. With consciousness raised by the feminist movement and ongoing education, religious women recognized the level of patriarchal functioning that characterized congregations. Engrossed in their own emancipation, it would be some time before religious would see how their privileged position in the church had disempowered the laity. Those who did were seen as specifically antagonistic towards clergy and church hierarchy. The implementation of changes to congregational life, mission, ministry, education, and dress code prompted some bishops and clergy to attempt to assert their power.

What then was the effect of religious renewal and feminism on *wahine* Maori? I suggest that the consequences for Maori were different from those experienced by their *pakeha* sisters and were in a sense indirect. A number of reasons for this can be found. Maori familiarity with a communal lifestyle could be said to assist their passage into religious life. Although links to

whanau, *hapu* and *Iwi* were largely severed, congregational family had the capacity to provide a type of substitute. Renewal required each woman to reflect on her personal needs and commitment. This was a natural process for *pakeha* within the context of their individualistic culture, but was difficult for Maori whose perception is as part of *whanau*, *hapu* and *Iwi*. Efforts to reestablish links with family were traumatic for many sisters, and it is doubtful that *pakeha* would have any conceivable notion of the gigantic effort required of Maori in both time and energy to reestablish and maintain the social breadth of their concept of family. The resources available to assist renewal emanated mainly from within European culture. These dealt primarily with individual approaches to needs and suggested solutions. Books, retreats, renewal courses, counseling, visiting speakers, and changed formation processes held some appeal for *pakeha* mentality because of content and perception. Until the early 1990s, written resources and lectured papers by indigenous authors on related topics remained scarce. There are still no resources that deal specifically with Maori needs, experiences, and aspirations in religious life.

In retrospect, the introduction of the feminist movement ethos into religious life assisted the liberation of women religious from some of the injustices that held them captive for generations in society, church, and congregational life. Efforts to overcome years of male domi-

nance also involved dealing with domination experienced in congregational governance structures that operated on a hierarchical male model.¹³ The white middle-class women that characterized congregations in Aotearoa, like their counterparts in secular society, seemed oblivious to the fact that, as part of the dominant culture, they held and controlled power and resources. Through this, they were directly contributing to the oppression and domination of indigenous peoples, including indigenous religious. Whether they hoped or assumed what was empowering and liberating for them would have similar benefits for all religious women is not known. What is known is that Maori response to the feminist movement came later and was quite a different response.

There are Maori who accept that because of the feminist movement, *pakeha* women achieved a level of liberation and were able to enjoy some social, economic, political, and emotional equality with *pakeha* men. There is also a school of thought that believes this has been at the expense of Maori men and women. The latest Maori Affairs statistics showing Maori as the group that continues to be at the bottom of the social heap, tends to indicate scant positive growth for Maori, particularly *wahine* Maori.¹⁴

Indigenous women continue to argue against the great white assumption that pervades the volumes written on religious life, renewal, feminism, and religious life regarding women and their relationship to church and male hierarchy. This presump-

tion, characteristic of so many feminist writers, is that when they refer to women's experience it is inclusive of all females. But this denies the experience and cultural uniqueness of indigenous women. Many indigenous women argue that they do not equate with the perspective of these writers and in fact, some issues being touted as essential are irrelevant or of little importance to them.

The significance of different cultural interpretations was acknowledged by some writers from about the mid-1990s, following challenges and critiques of available writings by a number of Asian theologians.¹⁵

Gerald Arbuckle has applied cultural anthropological analysis to his writings on religious life to provide valuable resources to aid understanding of peoples.¹⁶ In 1995, while in Auckland, Professor Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza met with a small group of *wahine* Maori and emphasized the need for indigenous women to commit their theological perspective to print. The author was one of those present.

Schussler-Fiorenza spoke of the growing imbalance in available resources and therefore in perspective, reminding indigenous women that they must articulate their own God relationship and be proactive in the development of indigenous feminist theological resources. Many writers on religious life, such as Sandra Schneiders and Joan Chittister, are on a growing list of people that still appear oblivious to the fact that the main source of religious vocations in the present era are indigenous women.

These two write for their own context, but an uncritical acceptance of their findings in the context of Aotearoa is a cause for indigenous concern.

It is as though the cultural dimension of candidates becomes irrelevant on entering religious life. Many writers still appear burdened with a one-size-fits-all mentality. As the face of religious life changes from European to multiethnic, the efforts of these writers may be rendered inappropriate for the future shape of religious life. Vocations in Aotearoa and the Pacific region are mainly from non-European women.

Conclusion:

The imbalance in the struggle for equality and identity in religious life might arguably be attributed to the adoption of processes and structures that favored the dominant culture and psyche, thereby allowing this group to direct any changes. All proposed changes were assessed according to *pakeha* cultural norms and taught as the norms of religious life. Exclusion of Maori from the process of change, while possibly not deliberate, certainly set the stage for the continued ignoring of Maori presence, rights, and needs in religious congregations and church. The inability of *pakeha* religious to acknowledge their power as part of the dominant culture merely prolonged the cultural violation of *wahine* Maori. Numerically small, under resourced, unnoticed, voiceless, and having previously shown an ability to adapt to

pre-Vatican II religious life, Maori received treatment identical to *pakeha*. Unfortunately, this was culturally, spiritually, psychologically and socially inappropriate and unhelpful.

I contend, therefore, that, because whoever determines the processes of change ultimately controls the direction of the organization, Maori were excluded from influencing the process of restructuring that preceded Vatican II. Until the late 1980s, Maori, who continued to be ignored as the treaty partner of *pakeha*, experienced the feminist movement in Aotearoa as another tool of oppression—the difference being that the power was concentrated in the hands of white women, not white males.

It cannot be argued that any one model of what constituted a post-Vatican II religious woman in Aotearoa evolved from the changes. What can be established is that particular women within various congregations embraced particular characteristics to different degrees. Independence was seen as the key to acquiring the freedom to express one's personality and to make choices on the basis of individual preference and need. The result was diversity and pluralism in community living, ministry, liturgical expression, prayer life, and continuing education needs. There was experimentation with new models of governance aimed at shared responsibility and consultative decision making processes. Education became a priority, with large numbers of Sisters studying for degrees, diplomas, and other professional qualifications in

preparation for new ministries and revitalized mission.

Pakeha religious women in Aotearoa who embraced the opportunity for change and personal growth might arguably be described as having some, if not all of the following attributes. They were educated, professional, independent feminists, self aware, spiritually diverse, familiar with Catholic social teachings, having a developing sense of justice and deepening knowledge of Scripture. *Wahine* Maori whose congregational "acceptance" was largely dependent upon their being assimilated into the subculture of religious life as *pakeha*, gained from renewal only to the extent that they were prepared to function in a *pakeha* way. There appears to be two distinct responses to renewal by Maori religious—continue the pretence and accept the new *pakeha* interpretation for living religious life, or resist and struggle to have their own cultural identity recognized and catered to.

Three things make this very difficult, if not impossible. First, living as *pakeha* had become a habit and combined with so little interaction with *Iwi* Maori meant that Maori religious had lost touch with the practice of *tikanga* Maori, *kawa* and *te taha wairua*. Secondly, they had to contend with resistance from *pakeha* who felt it was their right to reclaim their identity and culture, believing it to be the norm but unprepared to acknowledge that Maori religious had a distinct culture which they were entitled to claim also. Thirdly, there was the lack of culturally appropriate resources available

to Maori, which meant either using those geared to meet the needs of *pakeha* or doing nothing.

Wahine Maori sought outside themselves for *pakeha* tools to get in touch with cultural identity and spirituality when what they really needed was within them. They needed to identify and activate links with *Atua*, *tangata*, and *whenua* through a Maori cultural perspective. The acknowledgement, addressing, and enhancing of *tapu* would have signaled the presence of *mana* necessary for wellbeing, wholeness, and mission. *Pakeha* controlled the processes and the resources, but Maori held within themselves the essentials for their renewal. If Maori religious had been able to retrieve their cultural identity, *mana* Maori would have provided the interior strength to seek *hohourongo* with their congregations. However, this has not yet happened.



Glossary of Terms

Aotearoa — New Zealand
 aroha — love
 Atua — God
 hohourongo — reconciliation
 hapu — subtribe
 Iwi — tribe
 karakia — prayer
 karanga — call
 kawa — protocol
 mana — integrity, prestige, charisma, spiritual power, status

mana Maori — power/prestige of being Maori
 Maori — native people of New Zealand
 pakeha — not Maori, European
 pono — fidelity
 Reo Maori — language
 tangata — person/people
 tangi — wail, mourn,
 tapu — sacred, holy
 te taha wairua — the spiritual side of the person
 tika — just, right
 tikanga — custom, obligations & conditions
 tinana — body
 wahine Maori — Maori woman
 wairua — spirit
 whakapapa — genealogy
 whanau — extended family
 whanaungatanga — right relationship with God, people & environment
 whenua — land

Notes

- 1 See Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery, O.P., 1988 Rev. ed. New York: Costello, 1988.
- 2 *Perfectae Caritatis*, par. #2.
- 3 Pauline O'Regan, *A Changing Order*, (Wellington: Allen & Unwin Port Nicholson Press, 1986), 12.
- 4 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. No.28. 21 November 1964.
- 5 Joan Chittister, *Women, Ministry and the Church*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 76.
- 6 Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wine-Skins. Re-imaging Religious Life Today*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 23–24.
- 7 Gerald A. Arbuckle. *Refounding the Church: Dissenters for Leadership*. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 145.
- 8 O'Regan, *A Changing Order*, 66–68.
- 9 Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church*, 170.
- 10 O'Regan, *A Changing Order*, 12.
- 11 Schneiders, *New Wine-Skins*, 11–13.
- 12 Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church*, 146.
- 13 Arbuckle *Refounding the Church*, 60.
- 14 The Minister of Maori Affairs, *Progress Towards Closing Social and Economic Gaps Between Maori and Non-Maori*. Wellington: Te Puna Kookiri, 1998.
- 15 Lily Quintos, *Women and Culture: Women's Struggle for Equality in Church and Society*, ATESEA Occasional Papers 6 (1988): 43–58. See also C. S. Song, *PTCAA Fresh Beginning for Christian Theology*, ATESEA Occasional Papers 6 (1988): 6–8. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991. Kwok Pui Lan, *Mothers and Daughters, Writers and Fighters in Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, ed. R. S. Surinratharajah (Maryknoll, New York: 1994), 147–155. as well as Aboriginal theologian, Anne Patel-Grey, "Not Yet Tiddas: An Aboriginal Womanist Critique of Australian Church Feminism," in *Freedom & Entrapment, Women Thinking Theology*, ed. Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A Lee and Joan Nowotny. (North Blackburn, Vic.: Dove, 1995).
- 16 Gerald A. Arbuckle *Refounding Religious Life: Dissenters for Leadership*. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 10.

Inculturation within Myself and Religious Life in the Tongan Culture

Senolita Vakata, R.S.M.

Introduction

This is a theological reflection on taking into account theories and models presented by contemporary missiologists and anthropologists in order to discover appropriate approaches to different cultures and religions. The use of the social sciences in modern missions is to make an attempt to respond to the invitation from Vatican Council II, to be more open to other cultures and religions of non-Christian beliefs. It is a call to reinterpret the gospel in the light of local theologies.

The first part of this essay presents a brief historical background of Tongan religion and the arrival of Christianity. Inculturation then exists when the Christian faith is inserted into a cultural context. There follows a definition of culture, community, and inculturation in order to direct the discussion from an anthropological perspective toward an understanding of the process of inculturation one encounters. The essay concludes with a reflection on Johannine themes.

Tongan Religion and the Arrival of Christianity

Christianity arrived on Tongan shores about a century and a half ago. Prior to that, Tongan people were polytheistic. A very famous god, Tangaloa, was one of the principal gods. The origin of the monarchical government is ascribed to him and beliefs about him supported the claim of the divine nature of the king. According to Tongan mythology, Maui was the god who fished the lands out of the sea. Hikule was the god of paradise where "good" people go after death. We see here many biblical concepts of how God reveals himself/herself to the Tongans as a tribal people. During the time of acculturation, there was some of dialogue concerning the relevancy of these gods and the acceptance

of the one "true" God. Like all other missionaries who were sent to evangelize the "pagans," the Methodist missionaries adopted a "top-down" approach which aimed to convert King Siaosi Tupou I.

The king tested the Tongan gods who were in the form of idols and did likewise with the Christian God. He decided to destroy all the Tongan idols and proclaimed that the Christian God was the only true God. Most of the followers of the king were converted and to this day, Tonga remains a Wesleyan State (Methodist). The Catholic faith arrived twenty years later with the French Marist Fathers who were supported by Bishop Pompallier. Fr. Chevron was sent to Tonga with the aim of converting Ma'afu'outa, the chief of Mu which at that time was the seat of the Tongan Dynasty. Since that time, the people of this village have all been Catholics. Mu, now known as Lapaha, is where the mission of the Mercy Order took root in Tonga.

Arrival of the Sisters of Mercy

World-wide, Mercy Sisters are trying to live the charism of their foundress, Catherine McAuley. In differing ways, Mercy Sisters are called to make known the Mercy of God in the context of where God wants them to be. In 1964, four pioneers from the Mercy Congregation of Christchurch heard the same call to spread the Good News to the "poor" in Tonga. This call was a response to a felt need in the area of education and pastoral ministry. The New Zealand Sisters brought with them motives and strategies to implement their mission. Their presence in the village was accepted with gratitude. Their commitment was a high form of witness to God's love, for there is no greater love but to offer oneself for the sake of one's neighbor. It is a significant witness in a society where the main theme and mentality of the people is survival. The Tongan

lifestyle assumes that young people will eventually get married. To live singly is to challenge the norms of society. On the other hand, virginity is highly valued among most Tongans. Probably it is a symbol of being faithful to the Christian faith after abandoning the fertility cult. Much of western culture brought by later missionaries replaced traditional cultural practices that were abandoned as a result of the activity of early missionaries. A Pacific Islander, Leslie Boseto complained that when missionaries came to the mission fields:

they transplanted western faith in a theological pod, and instead of taking out the "plant" and placing it in local soil, they kept it in the pod and nurtured it with a western environment and climate.¹

Therefore, Christianity is seen to be a foreign religion. Three definitions are key to this discussion: culture, community and inculturation. Culture, in an anthropological sense, is defined by Luzbetak as: "A dynamic system of socially acquired and socially shared ideas according to which an interacting group of human beings is to adapt itself to its physical, social and ideational environment."²

This working definition of culture involves three levels. The first level is the forms in which symbols play a significant part and which, apart of their meaning, also "shape" the cultural norms. The middle level comprises the functions which provide the meaning of symbols, the logic, purposefulness and other relationships which underlie and connect the forms. Lastly, the deepest level of culture is the psychology or the mentality of a society with the basic assumptions, values, and drives that are the starting points of reasoning, reacting, and motivating. At this stage, it is important to stress that culture is a living system. A change in one part affects change in other parts of the whole. This leads to my next definition of community.

Basically, community means joint ownership.³ V. Turner defines it as "communitas" which "refers to the type of social relationships that one experiences outside the culture of normal community."⁴ These relationships are basic, one-to-one and informal. It describes the experience of initiates in Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, who are in many ways unhampered by cultural restraints. Thus, a tribal community refers to the relationships of the whole clan, both living and dead. Here the nuanced view of the community in the western

culture as compared to that of a tribal community is important to keep in mind as we approach our third term, inculturation.

Much of the conflict and confrontation in this process is due to differences in cultural forms, function, and mentality; though the differing elements in each culture probably play the same role in expressing different themes in differing ways. For instance, certain local beliefs are seen as superstition or ancestor worship, whereas western religion introduces the custom of "holy water" and praying of the Rosary into the local scene. Inculturation is a theological term which has emerged since 1967 and especially under the influence of the Second Vatican Council. This led to a movement within the Catholic Church whereby it was recognized that God is revealed through other religions and through cultures expressing their faith in ways meaningful in their own eyes. Shorter gives a brief clear definition of inculturation as the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.⁵

It is important to be aware of similar terms used before or after Vatican Council II. One still hears the obsolescent "indigenization" and the term "contextualization" favored by organs of the World Council of Churches which has, perhaps, a more extended and less precise meaning. The terms "accommodation" and "adaptation" were popular before Vatican II. They refer to a concept which is now considered inadequate, but which was, as we shall see, an important stage in the Church's thinking. There remains the highly theological and imaginative use, in this context of the word "incarnation" adopted by the Second Vatican Council. This usage is still found and, although it has various drawbacks, remains a dynamic and stimulating analogy. According to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., inculturation is:

the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question. This alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming in and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation.

The three definitions above provide us with two important points. First, they give us basic principles as

tools to help analyze and evaluate a particular culture. Second, to take the evaluation further is to discover the issue in the process of inculturation and to seek possible solutions or models to continue deepening the process of inculturation today and in the future. At this point, I would like to share a theological reflection on inculturation in my Tongan Mercy Community. This also involves an analysis and an evaluation of some of the issues which arise.

The Mercy Sisters, on their arrival in Tonga in 1964, brought with them their Western forms, life-style and polices as witnesses to gospel living. I have already pointed out that Christianity is seen as a foreign religion. Young women who felt called to this vocation are admired for their courage and commitment. Religious life was transplanted in Tonga according to a monocultural tradition and followed an essentially monastic model. Its presence raises young people's aspirations to see further the purpose of its existence. Eventually young

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women who were interested in the Mercy Order assumed its charism. One who is interested in pursuing this way of life is encouraged to participate in orientation weekends which aim to help the candidate to discern her call. This process takes place in the local situation, although a lot of western philosophy and ideologies are used unconsciously.

In other words, the elements of the two cultures (forms and its functions), both Tongan and New Zealand, are encountered at the same time. For instance, the liturgy is presented in European style and is of course a written tradition which is more formal and can be used in a structured

monastic life-style. When the community is bicultural, a common language has to be used, which is English. There is allowance for expressing prayers in the vernacular, but only in parts of the liturgy. This is due to the inability of foreign missionaries to speak the local language. The point that I want to make here is that when the local sisters are using the English language, some of them assumed English meanings to evaluate Tongan situations. In such cases, syncretism arises.

When the person decides that she is called to religious life and the congregation also accepts her, then she continues to the next stage of training to be a Sister of Mercy. One is unaware how intense the process of inculturation is in religious life, though one discovers it in the midst of the process. It is just recently that one learns through study that most of the confrontations one encounters in the formation process arise from participation in the process of inculturation. It is entering into a dialogue of faith and culture both in theory and in "praxis." Furthermore, Tongans who enter the novitiate go to New Zealand for further training. For me, this was a big step. The novice leaves her own roots to go to an unknown country. She is separating herself from her familiar culture and environment to assume a new culture and religion. Conflicts and confrontations encountered are seen as part of her growth towards maturity. It is an inner revolutionary process in the encounter between two different cultures and religions. I went through all these myself. It is a very trying process. It is even more difficult for a foreigner for whom English is a second language, and applies similarly to a westerner whose mission is in a non-English speaking country.

All concepts, such as those of biblical terminology take more time for the new sister to understand their full meaning. The person also has to deal with the forms and function of western elements which she assumed earlier. The process is similar to that of when she was a novice. When she reaches the psychological level, she may then be able to stand alone and critically analyze her culture in the light of the gospel. After two years, the candidate then makes her first commitment to the congregation and is accepted officially by the order. Further professional training may follow.

Most Tongan Sisters return to Tonga to work mainly in the educational field. This all sounds so

smooth and easy going. However, the person who returns home to Tonga is actually going through a time of crisis. For five to eight years, I had been exposed to many challenges that I would not normally have at home. Separated from my tribal family, I encountered both a western culture and a western religion and through further education overseas I had been influenced by western philosophy and ideologies. When I am at home, on a superficial level, I am at home with my family and wider community. However, there is a cultural gap between me and the wider community. This causes great frustration and disappointment for me as I try to readjust myself to meet the expectations that are placed upon me, as well as living out the conviction I gained from my education and spiritual experience.

At this point, dialogue is very important in all my relationships. This leads me to a reflection on the nature of community. At crucial times of personal crisis, I really need the support of the community, for "no one is an island." A religious community is a group of people living together under the same roof, working towards a common vision. For the purposes of this essay, I would like to present the distinction made by Raymond Plant that community should be considered as "a fact or as a value."⁶ He states that community as a fact "is something that can be defined socially. It is essentially a sentiment or feeling that people have about themselves.. This feeling gives rise to common action or behaviour." According to David Clark "two essential feelings or the existence of community are a sense of significance and a sense of solidarity."⁷ Individuals feel that they have an accepted position in the group. This gives them a sense of significance. They feel bonds with one another; this gives them a sense of solidarity. How significance and how solidarity are to be expressed in fact are most often determined by the culture, or the belief of the people who make up the community. Some cultures stress one or the other and some cultures seek to balance the two.

When we speak of community as a value, we move from sociology into ethics, philosophy, and theology. How one defines what a community should be depends on one's values. For the Christian, community as a value takes its foundation from the Trinity itself: "that may they all be one. As

you, Father, are in me and I am in you." (John 17:21 NRSV). We struggle with the grace of God to give visible expression to the presence of the Trinity, sharing in love and in openness, but without the loss of personal uniqueness. There is allowance for both "autonomy and mutuality." There is to be unity of heart and mind. Unity, which is not necessarily the same as uniformity, is to be achieved in and through healthy interaction, dialogue, and charity. It is unity born out of the freedom in Christ.

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The cultural expression of community is important. It is necessary to make a distinction between unity and uniformity. In a stratified society like Tonga, and in addition, living a monastic lifestyle where the Graeco-Latin model exists, insignificant persons in the community, who are voiceless due to personal impediment, are forced to identify themselves with the strong characters in the community in whom they find security and peace. In community, a witness body within the Church, each individual religious is expected to assume the same forms, that is, costumes, behavior and attitudes. This is seen in Tonga as unity. Therefore, unity and uniformity in Tonga are one element. When someone challenges the norms, it is seen as scandalizing the faithful.

A Tongan Marist priest observed in his thesis on the Tongan culture that the bases for proper social attitudes and behavior in the area of power, sexual status, and religion in Tonga is "honor and shame." Honor was to be preserved, developed, and protected; shame must not be permitted. Shame is the yardstick for any kind of sanctioning. Therefore, to express oneself differently from the group is seen as disunity and is very shameful to the community. This is exactly the experience of

Tongan Sisters who feel that there is a cultural gap in the process of inculturation.

Dialogue is essential at this point, but only if people are ready to listen. As religious who are called to encounter Jesus anew each day, we need to be people of love and forgiveness—and that is the basis of the Mercy Charism. Mercy Sister Rosaline Hendren composed a song of Mercy which says: "Mercy is to love and forgive, over and over again."⁸

The constant renewing of ourselves requires conversion of mind and heart. This level of inculturation reaches the mentality of individuals taking into account the facts and values of both cultures, Tongan and New Zealand, and reflection on them. Dialogue and discernment is involved so as to follow the work of the Holy Spirit and the charism of the congregation in one's life. Hence, both the messenger and the message must become incarnate in the lives of the individuals involved, must die and rise again with sacrifices—a constant search for new expressions of the message. How does one encounter syncretism in religious life? I would now like to return to the problem of syncretism which I mentioned earlier.

If we are evangelizers whose task is to spread the Good News to non-Christians, the gospel must be communicated in a way which the hearer can understand.

The problem of syncretism is explicitly seen in religious life due to the close mixing of the elements of two religious systems, Tongan religion and the Mercy charism to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems lose basic structure and identity. However, some elements of the Mercy charism already exist in Tongan culture, although the practical dimension of it seems to take on a different and more primitive form. Hospitality, for example, in the western meaning of the word, is to welcome strangers and friends to one's home and make them feel at home, although there are certain limitations on this when the aspects of economy

and even western philosophy are incorporated in the meaning of hospitality. In this case, a western host family could provide just enough for today because we have to "save up" for tomorrow. On the other hand, the clannic meaning of hospitality is different in that the strangers or friends are more than welcome. The host family are very generous. Because of kinship ties and the philosophy of life (a "live today, tomorrow will take care of itself" attitude), all the attention and concern of the host family is to provide love and care to their guests. This is not to claim that one attitude is better than the other. That would be an unfair judgement. The illustration is to show the differences of notions, philosophies, and meaning of a cultural concept. A concept such as hospitality requires us to be aware of its cultural interpretation and meaning.

When one is involved in the process of inculturation and reaches this point of syncretism, one should be very sensitive and be aware of the differences. To respect each other's cultures and its differences recalls a common saying: "When in Rome, do as the Romans." Of course, there is no pure culture. Culture is dynamic. The social, economic, and political demands of a particular period of history contribute to the changing nature of culture. It creates new forms. When the perspective shifts to a new form, it often leads to the development of local theologies; but how far does localization go? Schreiter asks similar questions: "How thoroughly contextualized does a local Church intend to become? Are there limits to contextualization? Can it reach a point where the gospel message is lost or communion is no longer possible?"⁹

He refers here to the Church, but similar questions can also be asked about religious community. Those who claim their roots from a western faith and ideologies and yet are members of the Mercy Community are not all westerners. How far do we go in contextualization? I think that there is a danger in comparing an oral tradition against written traditions.

I would see one as complementing the other. That would be a more holistic and broader way of looking at things. Leslie Newbigin contributes to the discussion of contextualization by saying that if we are evangelizers whose task is to spread the Good News to non-Christians, the gospel must be communicated in a way which the hearer can understand.

Newbigin maintains: "It must, we say, 'come alive.' Those to whom it is addressed must be able to say, 'Yes, I see. This is true for me, for my situations.'"¹⁰

I believe that if the gospel is truly to be communicated, what comes home to the heart of the hearer must really be the gospel, and not a product shaped by the mind of the hearer. This takes us to the theme of "Diversity in Unity." Newbigin concludes his view on evangelization by stating that the gospel in a pluralist society enables us to widen our horizon of how God is: As we confess Jesus as Lord in a pluralistic society, and as the Church grows through the coming of the people from many different cultural and religious traditions to faith in Christ, we are enabled to learn more of the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God (Ephesians 3:14-19) than we can in monochrome society.¹¹

Conclusion

To conclude my discussion on inculturation in religious life, I would like to refer to the theological aspect of dialogue presented in John's prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-4, NRSV)

God's plan is to share the fullness of God's life with every human being. Creation, Christ, and the Church are each different aspects of God's self-revelation and communication. I know that a human being is inseparable from culture, so that when God made the decision to become human, it was equally a decision to be identified with culture. A Tongan Christian theology strives to take Christ (God's revelation) into Tongan culture and allow him to speak from within and to become part of the Tongan culture. It seeks to make Christianity attain a Tongan expression, thus creating an atmosphere whereby Christianity may come to be accepted as part and parcel of the Tongan way of life.

In this way, the gospel will create a new form (humanity) and a new culture in the image of God.

The aim of all these aspects is the revelation of God's love, enabling humans to accept it and become one with it and become one with God and find salvation. Hence a religious community is called to be a sign of the kingdom, continually renewing itself to live up to its call to keep the hope and the struggle of the kingdom alive, and to grow in the appreciation of it. Ennui Mantovani summarizes the eschatological view of the kingdom in the process of inculturation: "The Kingdom is already among us, but it is not fully present as yet, and sin, in all its aspects still reigns. Eventually God's love will triumph and sin (which means trust in God's love which forces people to fend for themselves, to use other people and everything else to find fulfillment) will be finally over come."¹²

Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The main thing in all this discussion, I believe, is to accept God's love. The mission of the Church and of every Christian is to point to this love and call for repentance, for a change of attitudes.



Notes

- 1 *South Pacific Theology: Christianity in the Pacific Context* by Sione Amanaki Havea (Suva, 1987), 11.
- 2 Louis J. Luzbetak, S.D.V. *The Church and Cultures*, (New York: Orbis, 1987), 74.
- 3 See the *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (Melbourne: 1976), 227.
- 4 Cited by Luzbetak, *Church*, 270.
- 5 Aylward Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988).
- 6 Cited by Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Strategies for Growth in Religious Life* (New York: St Paul, 1987), 206.
- 7 Cited by Arbuckle, *Strategies*, 207.
- 8 Rosaline Hendren R.S.M., (Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand.) "Mercy is to Love and Forgive." (Hymn). This theme is a challenge in itself.
- 9 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1985), 145.
- 10 Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 141.
- 11 Newbigin, *Gospel*, 244.
- 12 Ennio Mantovani, "Dialogue with Primal Religions," in *Mission and Dialogue*.

The Woman of Samaria (John 4:1–42)

Celebrating Mercy Women and Culture

Kathleen P. Rushton, R.S.M.

Between 7–13 January 1999, Sisters of Mercy from Tonga, Western Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Aotearoa New Zealand, the Philippines and Australia gathered in Kaikoura, Aotearoa New Zealand for Te Hui Atawhai o te Moana Nui a Kiwa/Mercy Pacific Hui. Mercy Pacific originated in 1990 and evolved as an entity which is widespread and informally linked because of its geographical spread across the vast South Pacific Ocean yet is closely linked through friendship and Mercy origins. The venue of our gathering was Takahanga Marae of the Ngati Kuri people of the Ngai Tahu tribe. The following article is developed in the light of reflection given by Liz Dowling (Ballarat, Australia) and Kathleen Rushton (Otautahi/Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand).

The land of Aotearoa New Zealand is graced with vistas of mountain and sea. One of the more dramatic of these panoramic views is that of the snowcapped Seaward Kaikoura Mountains, which sweep down to the Pacific Ocean. They are seen from the front of the *wharemuri* of Takahanga Marae where Liz Dowling and I were sitting. Our more immediate vista was the sea of faces before us of many Mercy women based in Tonga, Western Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Aotearoa New Zealand, the

Philippines and Australia, and whose congregations comprise Mercy Pacific. Among us were representatives from Guam, Ireland, and the United States of America. Myriad stories of cultures and the experience of Mercy cultures had been the focus of our

the Johannine tradition, and subsequently to the diversity of earliest Christianity as models for later ecclesial practice, is lost or caricatured.

The reader is alerted to the tension that will unfold as the narrator relates that when Jesus

The story of the unnamed woman of Samaria is one brimming with tension which stems from her culture and her gender.

days of cultural analysis. Liz and I offered a conversation that would bring these stories into dialogue with a tradition in our sacred story, a story of one whose culture and gender shaped significantly the Johannine communities' memories of Jesus and Christian origins.

The story of the unnamed woman of Samaria is one brimming with tension which stems from her culture and her gender. These shape her identity and her significance not only in her story (John 4:1–42) but in the symbolic world of the Fourth Gospel. However, the history of interpretation has trivialized and sexualized her identity as woman and as disciple. The heritage that her Samaritan culture and its particular practice of the religion of Israel bequeathed to

left Judaea to return to Galilee, he *had* to pass through Samaria (4:4). This story is therefore set within the well-known and long standing differences that had existed for centuries between Jews and Samaritans. Further, for the reader this is underscored as the story of the unnamed woman of Samaria as it is set alongside the preceding one in which a high status named male, Nicodemus, is introduced as a leader of the Jews and a Pharisee who comes to Jesus by night (3:1–2).¹ Generations of interpretations ascribe various shades of sexual immorality to the detail that this unnamed woman came to the well at noon presumably to avoid meeting other women. However, in the symbolic Johannine universe light and darkness are rep-

representative of hearing and heeding the message of Jesus. Noon is the brightest time of the day and suggests that the woman of Samaria contrasts with Nicodemus who came secretly by night. She makes the transition to conversion in this gospel where characters are portrayed to depict the Johannine theme of understanding or misunderstanding the significance of Jesus.

The woman of Samaria knows her own story of her culture and religious traditions. In conversation with Jesus, she engages in the most extended and the most sophisticated theological discussion in the Fourth Gospel. Her conversation with Jesus weaves backwards and forwards while that of Nicodemus fades out and ends with a monologue in which only Jesus speaks. The woman recognized who Jesus is. She takes action and leaves her water jar in order to tell her townspeople about the one whom she believes to be the Messiah (4:28–29). Her leaving her jar (v.28) is evocative of the Synoptic male disciple call stories in which they leave the tools of their occupations.² This motif is entirely absent in the Fourth Gospel except for this instance. Her query: “Come and see a man who has told me everything I should *have* done. Could this be the Christ?” (v.29) is often written off as suggesting that she is not sure who Jesus is or has not yet come to faith. Not only is this woman diminished by the stress placed on her “doubtful” morality of which there is no evidence in the text itself, but also the reality that she is a disciple in the

Johannine sense is dismissed or unrecognized.³

The disciples return, not daring to reveal their real questions about Jesus and this Samaritan woman. The scene has implicit and explicit references to food, eating and not eating (John 4:27–34), to imagery of the harvest, fruit, and the sower which are evocative of fecundity, as well as apostolic call and mission. Jesus explains to the presumably male disciples the pur-

describes how he has accomplished God’s work. To do the will of God, or God’s work, is spelt out in 2b–3: “to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent.” Then Jesus prays for the disciples in vv.9–19. In vv.17–19, he parallels his own mission to the mission of the disciples (especially in v.18: “As you have sent me into the world, so I

The woman of Samaria knows her own story of her culture and religious traditions. In conversation with Jesus, she engages in the most extended and the most sophisticated theological discussion in the Fourth Gospel.

pose of his life and mission (v.34), and by implication theirs. Simultaneously, the woman of Samaria, identified by her gender and ethnicity, is engaged in apostolic activity which apparently has results (vv.39–43). It is clear that the Samaritan mission, which appears to be the initiative of this woman, is one in which the disciples will participate as “reapers.”

There is also a link between the mission of the woman of Samaria and the gathering together of the people of God which is part of the works of God referred to by Jesus in his prayer in chapter 17. Jesus prays: “I glorified you on earth *by finishing the work* that you gave me to do.” The meaning of 17:4 is amplified in vv.6–8 when Jesus

have sent them into the world”). Now Jesus prays for all those who will believe in him through the word of the disciples (v.20). These words evoke the one of whom it is said “many Samaritans . . . believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (4:39). As Schneiders points out, the text literally says, “through the word of the woman bearing witness.”⁴ The woman of Samaria is the first and only person, in the public ministry of Jesus in this Gospel, through whose word of witness a group of people is bought to “come and see” (v.29) and to believe in Jesus (vv.41–42).⁵ Further, the “eternal life” of 17:2b–3 also recalls Jesus’ discussion with her (4:7–15) in terms of the imagery of water, thirst and “a spring of

water gushing up to eternal life” (v.14).

This recalls the first appearance in this Gospel of the verb, *teleo*. Jesus’ mission is to do the will of God, the one who sent him. This means that Jesus must “accomplish” or “bring to perfection” a certain “work”. It is remarkable that these first occur within the context of the story of the woman of Samaria. (4:34.) These two expressions occur again in the ministry of Jesus in 5:36. Through these evocations of the story of the woman of Samaria in the prayer of the Johannine Jesus, which according to many scholars takes the form of testimony genre, the gender and cultural tensions found in the story of the Samaritan woman’s mission are into the sacred space and intimacy of the supper table on the night before the Passover supper. Here the Gospel, the very essence of

Jesus’ self-revelation even as she reveals herself to him.”⁷ Intimately part of the mission of Jesus is the accomplishing of the works of God. During Jesus’ discussion with the presumably male disciples (4:31–38) about mission to the world, the woman of Samaria is simultaneously involved in such work (vv. 28–30, 39–42) with the result that her townsfolk acknowledge Jesus to indeed be “the Savior of the world (v.42).”⁸ Nigerian scholar, Teresa Okure highlights that this woman exemplifies the approach of a true missionary for she brings her people to Jesus and they recognize who Jesus is.⁹

During the *Hui*, Veronica Lokalyo of Papau New Guinea coined the brilliantly strong image of “bumping around” to suggest a vision of how cultural difference may operate. Each culture remains and develops. In the processes of meeting with

of Greeks, Galileans, Judaeans, and Samaritans. The late-first-century religion of Israel from which rabbinic Judaism and Christianity arose was certainly not monolithic in belief or practice.

The influence of a new group within the Johannine communities is found “bumping around” in the text. Samaritan religious traditions and theology are obvious and depart from other Jewish beliefs and practices and their appropriation in earliest Christianity. For example, the other three Gospels tend to stress the Davidic line, the importance of the Temple, and the role of apostles—in particular the twelve. The nuances of the Johannine Gospel are quite different. This may be accounted for by the possible influence of Samaritan Christians. While no one can be sure who wrote this gospel, Schneiders suggest that

**The Samaritan Woman in the text is the
recipient of Jesus’ direct self-revelation
which constitutes her message and
establishes her authority.**

which concerns the witness found in the encounter between Jesus and post-resurrection disciples,⁶ highlights a community struggle which evolved after the departure of Jesus. Feminist biblical scholars like Sandra Schneiders have drawn attention to the effectiveness of the ministry of the woman of Samaria and her depiction as “a genuine theological dialogue partner gradually experiencing

and living with other cultural traditions, dents and bumps develop in an assertive and sometimes painful process to come to respect and accommodate difference. Veronica’s vision of “bumping around” is evident in the Fourth Gospel. There is evidence of several theologies or strands of tradition in this Gospel. The Johannine community is comprised of different cultures. There is at least evidence

The Samaritan Woman in the text would represent a theologically astute, second generation Johannine Christian well able to blend Jewish and Samaritan theology into the peculiar Johannine synthesis with its “I am” God theology, anti-temple bias, high Christology, egalitarian and inclusive ecclesiology, and sense of superiority to the Churches founded by the Twelve. She is the recipient of Jesus’ direct self-revelation which constitutes her message and establishes her authority.¹⁰

Schneiders sees that the “textual alter ego of the evangelist, whatever her or his actual identity and gender might have been,” is the figure of the Samaritan Woman, the single individual who wrote the text yet whose

This story of the woman of Samaria most likely points to the possibility that the shapers of the tradition had experience of women, and evidently Samaritan women, as theologians and apostles, a situation which aroused tension in the communities.

identity has been permanently disguised.¹¹

This story of the woman of Samaria most likely points to the possibility that the shapers of the tradition had experience of women, and evidently Samaritan women, as theologians and apostles, a situation which aroused tension in the communities. The story is shaped to present Jesus as legitimating female and Samaritan participation in roles appropriated by males of the dominant cultural group(s). This view is developed by Western feminists to counter previous emphasis given to her ethnicity which obscured her gender. However, another reading is possible and pertinent to this reflection developed in the time that has elapsed since the cultural analysis of the *hui*. The prominent and significant roles of women in the Fourth Gospel is widely acknowledged.¹² However, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, the mother of Jesus, Mary of Clopas, and the women at the cross are most likely all women of Jewish cultural heritage and arguably representative of the majority culture as well as the culture of higher status in the sociocultural and religious world in which Johannine Christianity arose.

The place of Samaritan Christians within the supposed egalitarian Johannine communities was not just an issue for males of the dominant ethnic group. Women of the dominant culture(s) then and now must contend with concerns arising from gender. However, the tradition of the woman of Samaria in which Jesus affirms and defends her mission to her own people highlights that then and now women of the dominant culture(s) must also contend with their assumptions and participation in the privilege which originates in their ethnicity and cultural heritage.



Notes

- ¹ Mary Margaret Pazdan, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17.4 (1987): 145-148.
- ² Mark 1:20; 2:14; Matt 4:22; 9:9; Luke 5:11; 5:28.
- ³ On major commentaries which undermine the woman of Samaria's "evident identification" with the post-resurrection disciples-apostles of Jesus, thereby ignoring or suppressing "the characteristically Johannine

pattern of faith development" (1:35-39, 41-42, 44-51; 20:18-20, 25), see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 193, 188. On her symbolic representation of her people, see Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 58-69.

- ⁴ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 192.
- ⁵ Before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, John points out Jesus to two of his followers who subsequently bring personal acquaintances and relatives to Jesus (John 1:35-42).
- ⁶ See the excellent chapter of Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 97-131.
- ⁷ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 191.
- ⁸ 4:35; 5:36; 17:4; 19:28; 30. On the handing over of this mission to the disciples, see 4:31-38; 17:18; 20:18.
- ⁹ Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of Jn 4:1-42*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.31 (Tübingen: J.B.C. Mohr / Paul Siebeck, 1988).
- ¹⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Because of the Woman's Testimony . . . Reexamining the Issue of Authorship in the Fourth Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998), 533-534.
- ¹¹ Schneiders, "Woman's Witness," 535.
- ¹² Raymond E Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 688-699; Sandra M. Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and Roles of Women in the Contemporary Church," *Biblical Today Bulletin* 12.2 (1982): 35-45.

The Absence of Women in John 21

Liz Dowling, R.S.M.

The women of the Fourth Gospel are indeed remarkable. Though few in number in comparison with the male characters, these women play vital roles within the Gospel. The mother of Jesus (2:1–12; 19:25–27), the Samaritan woman (4:1–42), Martha and Mary of Bethany (11:1–44; 12:1–8), the women at the cross (19:25–27) and Mary Magdalene (19:25–27; 20:1–18) model faithful discipleship.¹ There is an integrity about their struggle to understand and their faith journeys which leads them to fullness of faith. As such, they are often contrasted with male characters who are not presented as reaching the same level of understanding.²

The Samaritan woman, for instance, provides a contrast with Nicodemus (3:1–21). Nicodemus is named, male, a Jew, and has status as a Pharisee and leader of the Jews. He comes to Jesus by night (3:1–2). The woman is unnamed, a Samaritan, has no status and comes at noon when the light is most brilliant (4:6–7). Both characters engage in a conversation with Jesus in which they misunderstand the symbolism used by Jesus (3:3–4; 4:10–15). Nicodemus is not portrayed as coming to understanding and his conversation with Jesus ends in a monologue by Jesus (3:10–21). The conversation between Jesus and the woman, however, remains a dialogue (4:7–26). As the conversation between Jesus and the woman continues, the woman's understanding develops and leads to a missionary role in which she brings other Samaritans to Jesus (4:28–30, 39–42).

The anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary of Bethany (12:1–8) is an action of self-giving and intimacy which prefigures Jesus' action in washing his disciples' feet (13:1–20). Her love models the command of Jesus to his disciples (13:14–15, 34–35), thus marking Mary as a true disciple. The extravagance of Mary's action is emphasized by the perfume filling the house (12:3) and is contrasted with

the critical reaction of the unfaithful Judas (12:4–6). Mary can also be contrasted with Peter who protests against Jesus washing his feet (13:8) and then continues to misunderstand the significance of Jesus' action (13:9).

Having demonstrated her faithfulness at the foot of the cross (19:25), Mary Magdalene is the first to go to the tomb (20:1). In 20:1–18, she journeys from misunderstanding (20:2) to full faith (20:18). In contrast, Peter races to the tomb but is not portrayed as coming to understanding and finally returns to his home (20:6–10). Similarly, the Beloved Disciple goes to the tomb and, while the reader learns that the Beloved Disciple sees and believes (20:8), it is not clear exactly what is believed (20:9). It is Mary Magdalene who receives the first resurrection appearance and who is commissioned to announce the resurrection to Jesus' brothers and sisters (20:11–18). Once again, a woman persists in her struggle to understand and comes to faith.

The women of the Fourth Gospel are portrayed in a positive light, showing initiative and taking leadership roles. That women are portrayed in such a way suggests that women were not only part of the Johannine faith community but had prominent roles within it. "It seems more than likely that real women, actually engaged in theological discussion, competently proclaiming the gospel, publicly confessing their faith, and serving at the table of the Lord, stand behind these Johannine characters."³ The women of the Fourth Gospel who display initiative and courage mirror the actual women in the Johannine community who have leadership roles.

While the author of the Fourth Gospel is aware of the existence of the twelve (6:67–71; 20:24), the twelve are not given the prominence in the Fourth Gospel that they have in the Synoptic tradition. Instead it is the inclusive term "disciples" which is regularly used. Hence, the importance of the

twelve is downplayed in the Fourth Gospel. Similarly, while Peter is a prominent figure in the Fourth Gospel, he does not have the status which is accorded him in the Synoptic tradition. The Fourth Gospel has no equivalent to Matt 16:18–19 (“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church . . .”) in which Peter is given a preeminent role.

Rather than the twelve (or eleven) being given leadership positions, as in the Synoptic tradition (Matt 28:16–20; Mark 6:7–12/pars.), the Spirit is given by Jesus to the wider group of disciples in the Fourth Gospel (20:22). Male and female disciples receive a resurrection appearance (20:19–20), are commissioned (20:21) and are given the power to forgive sins (20:23).⁴ The Johannine community does not depend on the twelve for its legitimacy but on those “whom Jesus legitimates through his commissioning and the gift of the Spirit.”⁵ As such, women and men are enabled to have prominent positions within the community.

Discipleship in John 21

However, while the first twenty chapters of the Fourth Gospel suggest that the Johannine community practiced inclusive participation and leadership, a different portrait is painted by John 21. Here we have another resurrection appearance to a group of disciples—Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two others. The identified disciples are male and the context of a fishing scene (21:1–4) suggests that the other two disciples are also male. The reference to Peter being naked (21:7) further indicates the likelihood that his companions are male. Hence, the final chapter of the Fourth Gospel presents an all-male group of disciples. The women disciples of the earlier chapters are nowhere to be seen.

In 21:14, the reader is informed that this is the third resurrection appearance to the disciples. The effect of this verse is to cause the reader to bring to mind the other two occasions on which Jesus is revealed to the disciples. This is where problems arise for, in fact, three appearances have been described in John 20. The first of these is to Mary Magdalene (20:11–18), followed by an appearance to the disciples without Thomas (20:19–23), then an appearance to the disciples with Thomas (20:24–29). Hence the reader must try to reconcile what is

known from John 20 with the statement in 21:14. Has the narrator made a mathematical error? Or has one of the appearances not been counted, and if so, which one?

Since the appearances to the disciples, with and without Thomas, take place in the same location a week apart, it seems unlikely that it would be one of these appearances which is overlooked. Surely they will both be counted or both omitted. That leaves the possibility that it is the appearance to Mary Magdalene which has not been included. Many scholars explain the discrepancy in number of appearances by diminishing the role of Mary Magdalene, suggesting that she is not a disciple and consequently the resurrection appearance to her has not been counted.⁶ Why is it that Mary Magdalene is not considered a disciple? She is the first to receive a resurrection appearance (20:11–18), and the first to announce “I have seen the Lord” (20:18; cf. 20:25). Jesus’ commission to Mary Magdalene gives her a unique role in the Fourth Gospel to witness to the resurrection (20:17). What more is required before she is perceived as a disciple? It appears that the extra requirement which some demand is that a disciple be male.

While a male presentation of discipleship does not reflect the portrayal of disciples in John 1–20, the effect of 21:14 on the reader is to raise doubts as to whether Mary Magdalene should be considered a disciple. Not only have the women disciples disappeared from the scene in 21:1–14, but now the reader is encouraged to understand that the women are not really disciples anyway. Further, in 21:15–19, Peter is given a preeminent position which is more in keeping with his Synoptic portrayal than the portrayal in John 1–20. With regards to discipleship and leadership, there appears to be a discontinuity between the presentation in John 1–20 and that in the final chapter.

It is widely held that John 21 was added to the rest of the Gospel by a redactor at a later stage.⁷ The fascinating issue is why this chapter was written and added to the rest of the Fourth Gospel. While no answer can be claimed with certainty, some possibilities are worth consideration. Sandra Schneiders suggests:

Part of the agenda of this redactor was to make the Gospel acceptable in the Great Church by softening without completely subverting the two most

problematic characteristics of the Gospel: the autonomy, if not superiority of the Beloved Disciple . . . in relation to Simon Peter, and the preeminent role of women, especially Mary Magdalene as the foundational apostolic witness of the community.⁸

While the final chapter undoubtedly raises the status of Peter, it is difficult to see how the role of women is softened without being completely subverted. Rather it would seem that the status of Peter is raised at the expense of the status of women. The doubt raised in John 21 over the discipleship of Mary Magdalene, in particular, and women in general subverts the portrayal of women as disciples and in preeminent positions. We are left with a final picture of male disciples and Peter in the leadership role. This brings the Fourth Gospel in line with the wider church, and the distinctive identity and practice of the Johannine community is lost.

**Debate about the acceptable
roles for women and the location
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While the context has changed,
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across the centuries.**

The Role of Women - a Contentious Issue

It may be that the overriding concern of the redactor is to raise the status of Peter in order to gain the Fourth Gospel's acceptance in the wider church, and that the marginalization of the role of women is an unintentional outcome. Using the pastoral epistles, however, some interesting comparisons can be made regarding the role of women within early Christian communities. The pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) can be dated at a similar time as the Fourth Gospel and reflect a church based on the patriarchal household in which the

subordinate members are subject to the head of the house.⁹ As a result, women should be self-controlled and submissive to their husbands (Titus 2:5). Further, no woman is to teach or have authority over a man, but is to keep silent (1 Tim 2:12). Statements such as these strongly suggest that the role of women was an issue within the early Christian communities, otherwise there would be no need to comment on the woman's position. In particular, some women must have had teaching roles. Given that the Fourth Gospel (at least the first twenty chapters) presents a very different picture of women from one of submission, there appears to be a conflict between the portrayal of women in the pastorals and the Fourth Gospel. Since the role of women is a contentious issue, it is likely that the author of John 21 was aware of the effect and implications of the added chapter on the marginalization of women and that this was not an unexpected outcome.

In 4:27, the disciples are astonished that Jesus is speaking with a woman. It is not the fact that Jesus is speaking with a Samaritan which is astonishing, but that he should speak with a woman. Sandra Schneiders suggests that this verse is "aimed at those traditionalist male Christians in the Johannine community who found the independence and apostolic initiative of Christian women shocking."¹⁰ The reaction of the disciples (4:27) is not essential to the narrative in that it could have been omitted without affecting the flow of the narrative. However, while it may be considered an aside, its presence is important since it suggests an environment in which the role of women is contentious. Here we find a hint of tension within the Johannine community which supports the possibility that the redactor may have intentionally presented a different image of discipleship in John 21.

The narrative of John 21 is concerned with authority and power. It places the power and authority with Peter and those churches who venerate Peter. At the same time, it diminishes the authority of women as disciples and leaders within the church. The power and authority struggle within the Johannine community which is suggested by John 21 is one which may well be familiar to the contemporary reader. Debate about the acceptable roles for women and the location of power and authority in the church are issues which are at the heart of the

experience of many contemporary readers, just as they were important issues for members of the early Christian communities. While the context has changed greatly, in one sense a similar drama is being enacted across the centuries.

The image of discipleship and leadership which emerges from reading John 21 is not normative for today and evermore. Rather than focus exclusively on the male disciples and male authority depicted in John 21, the contemporary reader is able to hold on to the more inclusive images which have permeated John 1–20—and as I commented earlier, the women of the Fourth Gospel are indeed remarkable.

Concluding Thoughts

In this edition of *The MAST Journal*, which brings together the ideas of Mercy women in the Pacific region, I am reminded of the Mercy Pacific Gathering in Kaikoura, Aotearoa New Zealand in January, 1999. An insight which was shared at this gathering was of the importance of different cultures continuing to “bump” into each other. The more “bumping around,” the more contact between cultures, the more we have a chance to be enriched by different cultures, learn from each other and grow in our shared understanding. The women of the Fourth Gospel are wonderful role models for us in this. They persist in their search, journeying through misunderstanding to faith.

In particular, the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus provides an example of “bumping” into each other. The woman continues to bump into Jesus, continues with the conversation (unlike Nicodemus) until she has come to understanding. While the initial encounter produces misunderstanding, she persists and is able to work through this stage. Not only does she come to faith, but she brings others to faith in Jesus. Her “bumping” bears fruit in her own life and the lives of others. Cultural and gender barriers are broken through in the story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus. This text can speak to us as we seek to be enriched by the diversity of cultures in our Mercy communities within the Pacific region and beyond.



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Notes

- 1 The woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) is not mentioned here since there is strong evidence to suggest that this narrative was not part of the original text. The oldest manuscripts do not include this story.
- 2 For discussions of the women in the Fourth Gospel, see Sandra M. Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982): 35–45; Gail R. O'Day, “John” in C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe (eds.) *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992) 293–304.
- 3 Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel,” 38.
- 4 Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 325.
- 5 Sandra M. Schneiders, “Because of the Woman's Testimony . . .’: Reexamining the issue of authorship in the Fourth Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 514 n.4.
- 6 See, for example, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John; An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978) 582.
- 7 See, for example, R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 Vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1966 & 1970) 2.1080.
- 8 Schneiders, “Because of the Woman's Testimony,” 535.
- 9 See Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 288–289, 316.
- 10 Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel,” 40.

End of a Century: Dawn of a Century

Anne Tormey, R.S.M.

In October, 1999, we the Sisters of Mercy (Perth Congregation) concluded our Chapter singing, as we gazed out over the Swan River:

"Now is Eternity

At the break of dawn of a century...

Love is our destiny"

As I sang, I imaged the six sisters who came up the Swan River from Fremantle in 1846 "disembarking in the most isolated settlement in the most sparsely populated and to European eyes, strangest country in the world."² Lured to the Swan River colony by Bishop Brady's compelling description of thousands of European children and millions of Aborigines awaiting instruction, they found a small settlement of fewer than five thousand people. Of these, less than five hundred were Catholic, while most of the Aborigines had moved inland. That in 1999 we sisters could stand and sing together was due to the first sisters' indomitable spirit in overcoming the immense trials of the early beginnings.³

I also imaged American Sister of Mercy, Sr. Concilia Moran speaking at a Health Care Conference less than a decade ago, intimating that in a very little while our bones too, would nourish the earth, and that what is important in the now is to foster

the capacity for mercy. Of those of us who sang, predictably only a handful of us will be here in thirty years. However, while the new century may mark our ending, undeniably it will present us with many fresh challenges.

Perth continues to be one of the most isolated cities on earth, and Western Australia one of the most sparsely inhabited areas.⁴ Caught in the currents of globalization, we are being forced to confront the realities of cultural diversity within our own country and to relate strategically within the diverse, populous, and largely non-Christian Asian Pacific region in which we are located. This year too, locally in

the ignorance and violence of our past use of the land, in our relations to its original inhabitants, and to minority peoples elsewhere.

Aboriginal Reconciliation

The ethical challenge of reconciliation between European Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has captured the national imagination and is a spoken or unspoken national priority. This year the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has circulated a draft document for reconciliation across the nation. It calls for the spiri-

There is evidence of an awakening of moral and spiritual consciousness in relation to the environment as we confront the ignorance and violence of our past use of the land, in our relations to its original inhabitants, and to minority peoples elsewhere.

Western Australia, issues relating to the sustainability of our environment in the wake of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, have occasioned feisty debate. There is evidence of an awakening of moral and spiritual consciousness in relation to the environment as we confront

tual reconciliation of the nation through recognition of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as the original inhabitants, and through commitment to community action. It reminds us that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain the poorest, unhealthiest, worst

housed and most imprisoned Australians." Issues of justice and equity are intrinsic to the reconciliation process, but given very different worldviews, they are not always easy to resolve. Within this state, there have been numerous Aboriginal land claims this year, partially because of the size of the state and the extent of claimable land. The legislation governing native title has confused pastoralists and mining companies who generate much of the wealth of the state. In our chapter, as we com-

Indonesian military and local militia violence in the wake of the UN referendum result on Saturday 4 September, East Timor is now occupied by a multinational Australian-led peace-keeping force. The tragedy in East Timor has led to much questioning in relation to Australia's foreign policy of support for Indonesia over recent decades. Australia recognized Indonesian annexation of East Timor, whereas the United Nations never did. It can be argued that Australia, as prime mover of

geographically and socially located within the Asian Pacific region. Bali is a closer and more favored holiday destination for many West Australians than Sydney. East Timor is only an hour by plane from Darwin. In a state and country of peace and plenty, a false sense of isolation can breed complacency.

Environmental Sustainability

The most hotly debated issue locally, this year, however, related to the sustainability of the forests in the Southwest, and to efforts to ensure maintenance of environmental, social, and economic values. *Time* magazine has designated the southwest of Western Australia as one of the world's twenty-five key sites for biodiversity. Although the richest areas of biodiversity are not in the forests, the forests are the habitat for a diverse range of distinctive flora and fauna species. The hardwood, eucalypt species of jarrah and karri, are peculiar to the region. The majestic karri trees, some over hundreds of years old, reaching heights of over 80 meters are the third tallest species of tree in the world. These species of eucalypt, as a source of high quality timber products, are quite central to the flourishing of a significant timber industry. However, as a result of past land use, timber felling and farming practice, only 10 percent of ancient forest remains; all of the tall, unlogged, ancient forest would fit into an area of 54 kms by 54 kms.

Public outcry followed the Regional Forest Agreement be-

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mitted ourselves to right relationship with God, with all people, and with the environment, we were particularly mindful of our commitment to reconciliation with the Aboriginal people. We are also mindful of what we stand to learn from the richness of their culture and spirituality.⁵

East Timor

On 20 October, Indonesia, our nearest neighbor, a nation of more than 200 million people recognized the independence of East Timor after a twenty-four-year struggle and the loss of over 200,000 Timorese lives. A country reduced to ruins by

the U.N Referendum in East Timor, miscalculated in relation to the timing and the expected outcome of the event. There was no provision for the protection of the people in the event of highly predictable civil war. The massacre of so many people led to public outrage within Australia and to immediate diplomatic negotiation by the federal government. Relationships with Indonesia have reached an all time low. Many Indonesians feel betrayed by an about-face in Australian foreign policy. Many Australians were shocked into awareness of flagrant violations of human rights on our doorstep, and of the realities of being

tween the federal and state governments in May, on the future use and management of forests in the southwest of Western Australia for the next twenty years. This agreement, designed to ensure balance, certainty, and sustainability in the management of the forests, was well within international standards for the preservation of temperate forests. The culmination of a process which had commenced three years earlier; involving the assessments of more than five hundred scientists and providing for extensive community consultation, did not alleviate

The state government reneged on the May agreement as a result of the pressure of public opinion. The revised agreement in July introduced a ban on clear felling in old growth forests and the phasing out of wood chipping by 2003. Structural adjustment initiatives were to be put in place to assist forest businesses and the more than four thousand people dependent on the timber industry. However, the impact on their lives and concern in relation to the viability of their townships led protests, often peaceful, sometimes violent.

the salinity problems and to combat greenhouse gases.

As well, an incipient debate emerged in relation to the disposal of toxic waste. While Australia is one of the largest uranium producing nations on earth, having one of the largest reserves in the world, we are not a user of nuclear power. The disposal of nuclear waste has never been an issue for us. It is, however, one of the greatest issues facing the planet, particularly industrialized and heavily populated nations in the North using nuclear reactors to generate electricity. Pangea Resources, a British owned company, is proposing an international repository for countries other than the USA, for the deep geologic disposal of high-level nuclear wastes. They favor a large outback area of Western Australia for the repository because of the geological stability of the area and the political and economic stability of the country.

However, it is not just the burial of radioactive waste on Australian soil which will have effects for thousands of years, but the transportation of nuclear waste that is a cause of public concern. To reach an inland burial site, the nuclear waste would have to be transported across country from a port on the western or southern coasts. The inherent tensions in the resolution of this proposal involve weighing the highly lucrative capital gain for the country—it would equate to the introduction of a major new industry—against the nuclear hazards. Currently, it is not part of government policy to import

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concern for the future of the forests. Logging in the old growth forests was to continue until 2020. The fate of the ancient giant karri trees caught the popular imagination; the forests, once lost, would be irreplaceable. The thought of losing a treasure which many of us have only recently acknowledged, was too much. The reaction was spontaneous, intense, and widespread. Politicians, conservationists, business people, sports people, and ordinary people contributed to the public outcry. In the debate, saving the trees took precedence over issues of scientific management, the viability of the timber industry, and the livelihood of rural communities.

Despite its centrality, forest management was not the only environmental issue of public concern this year.

Widespread salinization of the soil due to past indiscriminate clearing of the land, leading to rising water tables, has badly affected large areas of arable land. Western Australia accounts for more than 70 percent of the nation's dry land salinity areas. Over a third of the farmland is salt affected. Research has shown that original ground water levels can be restored by the planting of pine trees. From this year, the government will pay farmers to turn salt affected areas into pine forests to help fix

nuclear wastes into Australia. The question also arises in relation to this issue: what does it mean to think globally and to act locally? It could be argued that this is a contribution West Australians and Australia could make to the solution of a significant global problem.

These are some of the issues which confront us as we ask ourselves what it means to be a Sister of Mercy in this social location, at the dawn of the twenty-first century. As we are implicated in social structures which both mediate and perpetuate justice and injustice, the discerning of what it means to be in right relationship will continue to be no easy task. It will demand that each of us continues to pursue an inner journey of relinquishment, letting go of projects, roles, and possessions. In the process, we may have to face the deforested, infertile parts of ourselves, our own inner militia, and our own repositories of toxicity. The exigency will be to release the energy locked up in fear and denial, so as to enter into a greater giving, a new receiving, and a deeper gratitude.

Maybe the greatest contribution we can make as an aging group in an aging society, is to witness to what it means to be in right relationship within and among ourselves. This can only lead us to relate to other people not in virtue of a role, but in virtue of a common humanity, a common journey, a common experience of knowing belonging and isolation, exhilaration and disappointment, confirmation and significant loss, achievement and frustration, joy and

sorrow. Which returns us to our beginnings. From the first sisters, we learn that being in love with God demands that we hang loose, attuned both to unknowing and to being awakened.

It seems to me that Australian poet Judith Wright, in the following verses, provides a metaphor for our present experience:

*When first I knew this forest
time was to spend,
and times renewing harvest
could never reach an end.
Now that its vines and flowers
are named and known
like long fulfilled desires,
those first strange joys are gone.
My search is further.
There's still to name and know
beyond the flowers I gather
that one that does not wither -
the truth from which they grow.⁶*



Notes

- 1 From the Album *Dawn of a New Century*: Lyrics by Rolf Lovland, Secret Garden, Norway, 1999.
- 2 Kovesi-Killerby, Catherine. *Ursula Frayne: A Biography*. (Fremantle: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 111.

- 3 See Byrne, Geraldine. *Valiant Women: Letters from the Foundation Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia, 1845-1849*. (Melbourne: The Dominion Press for the Polding Press, 1981). McLay, Y.A., *Women Out of Their Sphere: A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia* (Perth: Vanguard Press, 1993).
- 4 Perth today is a thriving modern city of over 1.2 million people, the capital of Western Australia. This, the largest Australian State (with an area of 2.5 million square kilometers), represents a third of the nation's landmass; the coastline stretches for 12,500 kilometers. Western Australia is four times the size of Texas, but only has a population of 1.7 million, over 70 percent of which lives in Perth.
- 5 In 1967, a successful referendum recognized the presence of Aboriginal people by granting them the vote. Subsequently, there has been greater awareness of the richness of Aboriginal culture, of Aboriginal spirituality, of their relationship to the land, and of the devastation wrought by European inhabitants since 1788. A movement to grant land rights to the Aboriginal people led to the High Court decision in the Mabo case, in 1992, which rejected the claim that Australia was *terra nullius* before it was settled by Europeans. In 1997, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, *Bringing Them Home* was published heightening awareness of Aboriginal oppression.
- 6 Wright, Judith: "The Forest" in *Anthology of Australian Religious Verse*, selected by Les A. Murray. (Melbourne, Collins Dove, 1986), 221.

East Timor: A Call to Jubilee

Veronica Lawson, R.S.M.

I love my home town. It is northeast of East Timor, which is full of rivers and streams, stony ways, birds of the air and waves of the sea. Winds that blow in the sand make me love the town that I will never forget. Canes and bamboos, bushes, eucalyptus, and grasses, the endless verdure of the town where I grew up. But now, this town's story becomes more and more unhappy because the friendliness of the town has been lost.

My town, you look like a blue sky blowing away the winds to look for peace and freedom, but you cannot reach it.

My town, you are like a helpless bird with broken wings which will not allow you to reach out to the horizon and spread your voice. You cannot fly very high because your wings are matted with the blood that your people have spilt on the ground.¹

When Jose da Costa wrote these words on July 17 this year, he was not to know that within two months his townspeople would suffer yet again, this time more desperately than ever. Now, as the year draws to a close, Jose faces his final year examination in English. English is Jose's sixth language after Makasae, Waimaa, Tetun, Portuguese, and Bahasa Indonesian. Jose, a gentle young Makasae man who bears the very distinctive features of his people, is a little nervous. He is talented and under normal circumstances could expect a good result in English. For the past eight weeks, however, Jose has been waiting to hear news of his family who are among the one third of the population still unaccounted for in the wake of the Indonesian military backed militia rampage through his country.² He has not been able to concentrate on his studies. The East Timorese struggle for national independence is virtually over, but the cost has been unbearably high and the rebuilding process is still ahead.

Jose was joined this year in Sr. Anne's house by three other young East Timorese students, Ellya, Sancho, and Nicholau. Before the August

referendum, these young people constantly expressed their fears of a violent backlash in the likely event of a refusal of autonomy within Indonesia. Night after night they watched, videoed, and re-played the TV footage on the intimidation of their people. They marveled at the inability of the international community to respond to the militia threat of reprisals and to provide adequate security in the period leading up to and immediately following the vote.

Sr. Anne was in East Timor in the weeks leading up to the referendum. Jose and his companions feared for her safety along with that of their families and friends who were known independence supporters. In the days before the ballot, concerned friends gathered at their house for prayer and reflection on the biblical stories of exodus and exile in the light of their current experience. The mood was somber. Even when the result of the vote was declared a week after the ballot, with an overwhelming 78.5 percent voting for independence, Jose and his friends had little will to celebrate. They knew what could happen to their people and they felt powerless to help. Within days, their worst fears were realized. After the devastation of their country and the constant horror stories of forced removal, of rape and slaughter of innocent people, they tried in vain to make contact with their families. Along with other East Timorese refugees and asylum seekers, they threw their energy into raising the consciousness of their Australian friends and teaching us how to assist the refugees who, by mid-September, were arriving at the Australian government safe havens. Ellya, Sancho, and most recently Nicholau have received news that their families survived the massacre. Jose is still waiting.

Refugees in West Timor are slowly returning to the charred ruins of their former homes. Some will never return, having died of starvation or disease or violence in the camps. Most are still in exile. Scat-

tered around the globe are those who fled at the time of the Indonesian invasion and in the intervening decades. Some ten thousand East Timorese now live in Australia. Many of their children and their children's children have never seen the homeland of their parents. The hope of return has been sustained in the hearts of all those who have survived by an uncrushable sense of their identity and an unquenchable thirst for justice and freedom.

During twelve years of close friendship with East Timorese refugees, I have come to have some idea of what hope means. I have also come to realize, in the period of preparation for the year of jubilee proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, that any celebration of the jubilee in our part of the globe will be meaningless without justice and freedom for our indigenous people and for the people of East Timor. For me and for others, the cries of the East Timorese have become a call to jubilee.

The right to return and to reclaim ancestral lands is at the heart of the biblical notion of jubilee. Nations such as ours which sanctioned the Indonesian occupation of East Timor have a particular responsibility to work for the reconstruction of the country. In Australia, small groups that have struggled consistently over the past two and a half decades for the liberation of East Timor have now been joined by people from every walk of life in a groundswell of support for the emerging nation to our north. Towns are planning to twin with towns of comparable size, churches with churches, schools with schools.

So as trumpets proclaim the great year of jubilee in communities around the globe, the work of jubilee restoration begins in East Timor. Parallels with the experience of ancient Israel are not lost on the biblically attuned exiles amongst us at this time. The biblical jubilee texts in their final shape come from a time of major crisis in Israel's history, a time when the people of Judah were trying to rediscover their roots and to reestablish themselves in their homeland after a long period as refugees under foreign domination in a foreign land. With the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in the early sixth century BCE, Israel had lost temple and city and home. Fifty years later, the Persians permitted them to return to Judah, where they tried to reestablish themselves and to recreate an identity in continuity with their past. On their return from exile in Babylon, the people of Judah were no longer a political

force of any consequence, but they had the opportunity to recreate the bonds that had first formed them as a people. Their legislators, the priests, looked to the past, to what was unique in their identity on the one hand, and to what had gone wrong on the other. Out of this, they sought to articulate a vision for the future. They reworked the earlier Sabbath traditions of Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 15. They re-enshrined their vision in the cultic legislation of Leviticus 25.

A key issue for Israel from its beginnings was land tenure.³ The land was the gift of their God, YHWH. It was apportioned and held in sacred trust within tribe and clan and family. All had some share in the land and any decision to dispose of it was the

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decision of family within clan and tribe. With the monarchy, tribal arrangements gave way to a system of centralized authority. Small holdings were swallowed up or sold in payment of debts. Debtors themselves were enslaved, and unscrupulous creditors exacted exorbitant interest on loans. The marginalized, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, were further marginalized; the land was overworked; the needs of the animals were disregarded; and the disparity between rich and poor exacerbated. With the destruction of Jerusalem, the Israelites suffered the unthinkable: the total loss of the land that their God had given them. In exile and on their return to the land, there was a need to reflect on the past and to recapture the vision that had sustained them in tribal times.

The priests in exile and their successors in the post-exilic period confronted the challenge. Recognition of the divine ownership of the land, equitable access to the use and produce of cultivated land, limitations on creditors, forgiveness of debt, freedom from debt-slavery, and return to ancestral lands became the elements of their jubilee vision.

They recognized the capacity of wealthy minorities in their midst to exploit the poor. While the jubilee legislation had some limitations, its intention was to prevent any permanent exploitation. The hope expressed was that all should dwell in the land securely (Lev 25:18). To flout the prescriptions of the Jubilee was to violate God's covenant (Lev 25:17, 38, 42, 55) and to risk a return to original chaos.

Like the Israelites of old, the East Timorese are seeking to dwell securely in their land. They are focussing less on the external factors that have contributed to their sufferings than on the values that have brought them through a half millennium of colonization to the point of self-determination. They are taking steps to forge their future in partnership with other nations, including their former colonial masters. In the face of almost total destruction, they have maintained a firm belief that God would deliver them. Xanana Gusmao, their popular leader, is a poet of prophetic stature who never really wanted to be a politician. The pain of his country brought him to the struggle for justice and freedom.

That same pain has been the source of Jose da Costa's lament and his struggle for justice. Jose is a prophet in a foreign land. He will return to his hometown, Baucau, and take with him the hearts of those he has touched in exile. His story calls us to jubilee. In practical terms, this means listening to the exiles, learning from their capacity to forgive their oppressors, and responding in ways that facilitate the return to their homes and to a fully human, culturally sensitive quality of life. It means continual checking to avoid the ever present dangers, neocolonialism and exploitation, which still lie ahead.

Jose is a child of the resistance. When Indonesia occupied East Timor in December 1975, he was still in his mother's womb. His parents fled to the mountains with their children, five of whom perished. Jose was born in exile from his hometown seven months after the invasion. The family eventually returned to their home in Baucau, but would never reconcile themselves to their new colonizers. A decade later, his father was to meet a violent death at the hands of the Indonesian military. This event was the catalyst for Jose's decision to join the resistance, a weighty decision for an eleven year old child, and a decision which would have placed his whole family in jeopardy had the authorities known that he was still alive. To join the resistance was to

assume a new identity and to communicate with family through safe contacts, but never in person.

Jose's recent application for a scholarship to study at Australian Catholic University indicates that he completed primary school in Baucau, East Timor, and was afterwards "self-educated." Those two words "afterwards self-educated" embrace the story of a child's commitment to the values of freedom and self-determination, of early adolescence in the mountains with the Falantil freedom fighters, of arrest and torture at the hands of the Indonesian military police, of escape in a leaky boat, and of the struggle for asylum in a foreign land.

Last year, Jose found a temporary home and a school in Ballarat, a provincial city of southeastern Australia. This is the time for a muted celebration. The year of God's favor is still to come.



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Notes

- 1 Jose da Costa, "My Home Town," essay written as part of a writing folio for the Victorian Certificate of Education, July 17, 1999.
- 2 For information on East Timor, see the following websites: <http://easttimor.com>; <http://etan.org>; <http://www.gn.apc.ethrc/>; <http://www.freedom.tp>; <http://www.etra.zip.com.au>; <http://www.peg.apc.org/asiat/>; <http://www.web.apc.org/org/hands>.
- 3 For an introduction to the biblical jubilee, see Christopher J.H. Wright, "Jubilee, Year of," in D.N. Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1025-1030. See also, Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1996); Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

A Reading of the Vatican's Official Catechetical Text, "God, the Father of Mercy"

Patricia Fox, R.S.M.

In the recently published research project undertaken for the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church, the authors note that the overwhelming response to the research project is, in itself, a major finding.¹ It indicates, they reason, that the issue of the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia is crucial and controversial.² One of the concerns that flows through this extensive report, and one that elicited much discussion and depth of feeling is the issue of the use of exclusive religious imagery and language. The report observes that:

While there was much reference in the submissions to the use of exclusive social language as a barrier to women's participation [in the church], it should be noted that the most frequently mentioned concern related to the lack of inclusive religious imagery and language.³

This lack of inclusive religious imagery and language was seen as a failure to draw on the richness of the Christian understanding of God; to impoverish Christian spirituality for both women and men; to be demeaning of women and girls made in the image and likeness of God.⁴

In these years leading to the Jubilee year 2000, the church

has called us to reflect on the God who is at the center of our belief as Christians—God as a Trinity of three persons. The official catechetical text from the Vatican's Theological-Historical Commission for the final year of preparation for the jubilee is entitled *God, the Father of Mercy*.⁵

An immediate and primary impact of this Vatican document, written for the instruction of the faithful on the first person of the Trinity is that it reflects and focuses on only a few images from the whole spectrum available to the people of God.⁶ Within this, theologians have a particularly crucial role to play. There is an urgency to provide alternatives to the monopoly of male imaging of God. Within this, there is a particular challenge to address the overuse of father-son imagery.⁷

This document includes female metaphors and images from the natural world in its exploration of speech about God. However, when the bottom line is

reached, when the text is named and the images on the cover chosen, these alternatives are in fact forgotten or marginalized. In this, the document mirrors and reinforces the prevailing practice of speech about God in the church. On the whole, certainly in the Australian church, as strongly attested within the report on women's participation in the church, these acknowledgments of alternatives to the norm of male images of God still rarely get translated into teaching, preaching, or liturgical celebration.

The research undertaken for the Australian Bishops' Conference illustrates the stark pastoral reality that women are constantly encountering a language and a symbolic system that excludes them and undermines their identity as *imago dei*. I believe that this should be of serious concern to all who care about the proclamation of the good news of God's reign and about the building of a community of

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disciples as a church for the world today. It is therefore critical that the issues raised in this major research undertaking within the Australian church be addressed.

To this end, I want to focus briefly on three aspects from the official text for this year, *God, Father of Mercy*, that can contribute towards a constructive proposal for also naming the first person of the Trinity, God, Mother of Mercy.

I find within this Vatican text clear scope for rightly naming the first person of the Trinity, Mother of Mercy.

I approach this document from the perspective of a Sister of Mercy, as one who has for decades witnessed her sisters revealing the face of the God of Mercy to the poor. I also read it as a theologian who has become convinced by feminist insights on the doctrine of God that alert us to the fact that the symbol of God functions powerfully in very practical ways to shape history and culture. Both of these factors have combined to form my own experience of divine mystery and lead me to find within this Vatican text clear scope for rightly naming the first person of the Trinity, Mother of Mercy. The three areas on which I will focus are the document's claim that mercy is proper to God, the scriptural sources alluded to in the text of maternal imagery for God, and some implications of the document's references to Mary as Mother of Mercy.

Mercy Is Proper to God

The chapter in this text on the God of mercy begins with the assertion of Thomas Aquinas that: "Mercy is accounted as being as proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested.⁸ God's almighty power, according to Aquinas, is thus primarily exercised by God's merciful deeds. This claim is then linked by the

the divine name to be evoked most frequently in the history of the chosen people."¹⁰ It states further:

God's mercy is not expressed in words alone . . . but also in symbols and images, and God's merciful and loving attitudes toward all creatures, especially toward the chosen people. In songs, prayer, invocation and thanksgiving . . . the divine name which is mercy and goodness is exalted.¹¹

This claim is then supported by several pages of direct quotations and references from the psalms that provides a rich resource for meditation on God as mercy. The underlying point of this chapter is thus sustained. A study of the prayers of Israel reveal that their great and transcendent God, *I am who I am*, who will not be named by one name or image, is a God of mercy and tenderness. God's almighty power is consistently manifested as steadfast, faithful love. Mercy is shown to be proper to God.

It is within this section of biblical references from the Hebrew Scriptures on the God of mercy that two pages of maternal images of divine mercy are introduced.

Maternal Imaging of the God of Mercy

It is relevant to note where this section on the female images of God is placed. It appears towards the end, just before a shorter subset that illustrates "the notion of the divine mercy . . . in symbols inspired by nature." That is, female and nature

authors of this document to a key reference in Exodus 3. Here Moses asks for the name of the God of the ancestors of Israel. He receives the reply: *I am who I am* . . . Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "*I am* has sent me to you . . . This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations" (Exod 3:14–15).

The catechetical text goes on to stress that [t]his first revelation of the name is followed by a second, which completes it.⁹ It refers to the verses from Exodus 34 when God proclaims of Godself:

. . . a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. Exod 34:6–7

The commentary observes that: "Besides being almighty, God is also merciful. Indeed, this will be

images appear together and only after the norm—male images of the divine—is firmly established. It is also significant to note how these female images are introduced. The text reads: "The Lord's sweet, consoling presence in the Old Testament is also expressed in images of motherly tenderness."¹²

This is followed by direct quotations from Psalm 131, Isaiah 49; Isa 66:13; Hosea 1–8 and an evocative summary statement:

the images used by the prophet[s] are typical of those used by a solicitous mother, caring for her smallest children. She teaches them to walk by holding their hand, she lifts them to kiss them on the cheek, she bends down to feed them. God practices a pedagogy of love toward the people as any mother practices with her children.¹³

Those readers who are men perhaps cannot imagine how refreshing it is for a woman to come upon a "she" in a Roman text that refers to a human being. It is an even more amazing experience to have an image of God—She presented by the official teaching church—"She teaches them to walk by holding their hand, she lifts them to kiss them on the cheek, she bends down to feed them." Women are simply not used to being presented with images that illustrate the central doctrine of our faith that women as well as men are created in the image of God.

It is unfortunate, therefore, to have to comment immediately that the practice of confining examples of God as a tender parent to women finally does not help either women or men.¹⁴

The practice of speaking only of God's feminine attributes leads to unhelpful gender stereotyping. God's "sweet, consoling presence" needs to be illustrated by both female and male images, as indeed it is in the Scripture. Men's tenderness as well as

her. It is these kinds of female images that need to be juxtaposed with ones that portray God's "sweet, consoling presence."

In fact, both of these elements—tough love and tender love—are brought together with female images of mercy when,

The practice of speaking only of God's feminine attributes leads to unhelpful gender stereotyping. God's "sweet, consoling presence" needs to be illustrated by both female and male images, as indeed it is in the Scripture. Men's tenderness as well as women's is revelatory of God's presence.

women's is revelatory of God's presence. For similar reasons, female images of God that depict strength and power need to be used along with the consoling ones. There is an image in Hosea 13, for example, where a passionate God speaks:

It was I who fed you in the wilderness, in the land of drought. When I fed them, they were satisfied they were satisfied and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me. So . . . I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; Hos 13: 4–6, 8.

This kind of strong female imaging—God—She, the one who feeds, faithfully day after day and who is roused to anger like a mother bear when Israel forgets her, and seeks to "tear open the covering of their heart"—is surely an image of might and mercy, the Mother of Mercy who will not let her children forget

further on in the document, it is noted that the words *rahamim* ("entrails," "mercy") and *raham* (merciful) are applied to God:

They are related to *rehem*, "motherly bosom"—the place of care, defense and growth of life in its first beginnings. These words express all but a physical mercy on the part of God, who is a love with the 'bowels of mercy,' as if God had inward parts that wrenched with compassion at the sight of the creatures' suffering, a profound, spontaneous, inward love, a love charged with tenderness, sympathy, compassion, indulgence and forgiveness that bind a mother to her children (cf., e.g., Isa 49:15, above, and Exod 34:6–7).¹⁵

This passage conveys that in the Hebrew Scriptures God was revealed as a God of mercy who, as a strong and tender mother, is dynamically active to save her people.

Finally, the authors of this document observe that the Hebrew scriptures do "not devote a great deal of relevancy to the name of God as 'Father.'" ¹⁶ They comment that when it is used it "expresses primarily God's creative power, protection, authority, and maintenance of life." It is worth noting that the writers are aware that the texts provided in this document demonstrate that images of God as "Mother" are also used to express these very same attributes. They continue: "It is a powerful allusion to the goodness, at once fatherly and motherly, that God as provident Creator demonstrates vis-a-vis the people in need." ¹⁷

However, and this is a key point, the authors do not go on to pursue the logic of this claim—that if drawing from the Hebrew

tery, the pendulum cannot rest with one. ¹⁸ If God is promulgated as "Father of Mercy," in the teaching, preaching and worship of the church, God also needs to be promulgated as "Mother of Mercy."

God, Mother of Mercy

For my third point, I want to focus on the significance of the Marian title, "Mother of Mercy," the patron of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy. In recent years, research into the Marian tradition has revealed another strong reason for naming God as Mother of Mercy. This research shows that, over the centuries, humankind has instinctively refused to let go of the female face of God. Despite consistent attempts on the part of the magisterium to

formulations, have migrated to the figure of this woman. Mary has been the icon of God. For innumerable believers she has functioned to reveal divine love as merciful, close, interested, always ready to hear and respond to human needs, trustworthy, and profoundly attractive . . . Consequently, in devotion to her as compassionate mother who will not let one of her children be lost, what is actually being mediated is a most appealing experience of God. ¹⁹

Historically, it seems, that as soon as official worship and theological discourse moved towards exclusively male expression, this female alternative began to emerge under the respectable guise of devotion to the Mother of Jesus.

One of the most popular images and titles of Mary used for this is that of Mother of Mercy. Johnson's research reveals that God is pleaded with, trusted, and worshipped as Mother of Mercy, ever compassionate "Refuge of Sinners," and unrelentingly reliable Advocate and Mediatrix. She illustrates that a living spirituality of the triune God in female form has been functioning all this time, hidden under Mary's mantle. ²⁰

The authors of the official catechetical text *God, the Father of Mercy* devote a chapter to "Mary, the Holy Trinity's Sign of Mercy" and give particular emphasis to her under the title, "Mother of Mercy." They give no indication of being aware of the Marian scholarship referred to above. However, rather ironically, because they choose to draw generously from Marian prayers and devotional texts from the third

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Scriptures, God can be named "Father of Mercy." God can also be named "Mother of Mercy." The evidence is presented from the sacred texts but the conclusions still focus only on God-He, God the Father of Mercy. I want to argue that not only can God be named in female images as well as male, but that God must be so named. If the analogical swing between Yes and No is to be maintained in all speech about God, then many names must be used to convey the divine mys-

tain correct mariological doctrine in official teaching and discourse, the popular devotion of the faithful has escaped these restrictions by covertly projecting divine female attributes onto the most important female figure within the church, Mary of Nazareth. Elizabeth Johnson writes in her essay, "Mary and the Female Face of God":

Female images of God, arguably necessary for the full expression of the mystery of God but suppressed from official

century onwards from both Eastern and Western churches, they provide ample further evidence of divine attributes being transferred to Mary.

Let me give some examples. Joannes Kyriotis (d. end of the tenth century) speaks of the merciful mother as an advocate who "ceaselessly placates [Christ's] just wrath and causes his mercies and solicitude to come to all in abundance."²¹ Theophanes of Nicea (d. 1381) enthuses: "She, in truth, and without any fiction, is the divine mercy . . . the bowels of the divine mercy are she herself!"²² Alphonsus Liguori in his effort to stress Mary's mercy refers to Bernard of Clairvaux:

Saint Bernard wrote that Mary . . . opens to all the bosom of her mercy, to the end that all may receive from her, slaves their ransom, the sick their health, the afflicted their comfort, sinners their forgiveness, God his glory; and thereby that no one, Mary being the sun, fail share her warmth.²³

A prayer from the Ethiopian church invokes Mary: "Mary, font of mercy and clemency! Save me by your word, and deliver me from destruction, for without your succor none can be saved!"²⁴

Such examples as these give very explicit witness (apparently unwittingly) to a living tradition of Mother of Mercy related to by the faithful as divinity. In these prayers and devotions quoted in this text on God as the Father of Mercy she is appealed to, in turn, as advocate, source of life, savior. Texts such as these illustrate that over the centuries the faithful have implicitly worshipped the one called "Mother

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of Mercy" as the triune God. Thus, in spite of official practice, the Holy One has been consistently worshipped by the people of God as a merciful mother.

Conclusions

Fundamental to my concern in approaching this catechetical text issued from Rome on the edge of the new millennium are the two issues articulated by Elizabeth Johnson in her work on the Trinity:

Feminist theological analysis makes clear that exclusive, literal, patriarchal speech about God has a twofold negative effect. It fails both human beings and divine mystery . . . Simultaneously, this discourse so reduces divine mystery to the single reified metaphor of the ruling man that the symbol loses its religious significance and ability to point to ultimate truth. It becomes, in a word, an idol.²⁵

It is my observation that in much of the present teaching, preaching, and worship of the Roman Catholic church, the symbol "God the Father" has acquired this dominance and as such does fail both human beings and divine mystery. Findings from the report on the participation of

women in the Catholic church in Australia confirm that this is the experience of many women in this country.²⁶ For all of these reasons I believe that there is an urgency for theologians and for those in pastoral positions in the church to address this issue.

I have been arguing in this brief paper that if one listens attentively to the tradition, as it is filtered through the lens of this Vatican document on God, the Father of Mercy, it is possible to find sources that point to the need for the Church to change radically its practice of speech about God. This document speaks of YHWH, "the One who is" is identified as a God of Mercy who sees our pain, knows our sufferings and comes to save us. Mercy is shown to be the way this God exercises divine omnipotence. Biblical sources reveal God as both maternal and merciful. And finally, the practice of the people of God over centuries (albeit covertly) confirms that God can and needs to be named "Mother of Mercy."

It is not sufficient to admit that there is room for female images of God, that God can be described as motherly as well as fatherly. This acknowledgment needs to be translated into

practice. Women as well as men need to be acknowledged to have been created in the image of God. The image of God, Mother of Mercy, along with many others, needs to assume its proper place in the teaching, preaching and the worship of the church. Since the time that Catherine began her work in Baggot Street, thousands of Sisters of Mercy around the globe have been revealing the female face of the God of Mercy. It still happens every day. I believe that our times call us to the task of explicitly claiming Mother of Mercy as one of God's names.



religious and social language were put together, they would represent the third greatest barrier to women's participation."

4 Ibid.

5 *God the Father of Mercy: Official Catechetical Text* in preparation for the Holy Year 2000. The Theological-Historical Commission translation reinforces the prevailing practice of the teaching church in its use of exclusive male images for God. This is in spite of the positive fact that it adheres to the growing custom within Roman documents of drawing attention to the many ways of naming God in the Bible and in other devotional sources.

6 See for example *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 39-43; 239, 370; *Apostolic Letter: Mulieris Dignitatem* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1988) 28-31.

7 See for example the implications for theology's dialogue with the critical issue of ecology in Denis Edwards, "The Importance of Going Beyond Father-Son Language for a Trinitarian Theology of Creation," forthcoming in *Theological Studies*.

8 *God the Father of Mercy*, 43.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 43-44.

11 Ibid., 44.

12 Ibid., 49.

13 Ibid., 49-50.

14 And especially since the Hosea text (11:1-8) upon which the above commentary is based in fact refers to YHWH's fatherly love. See *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 14:30.

15 *God the Father of Mercy*, 50-51.

16 Ibid., 51.

17 Ibid., 52.

18 See Karl Rahner, "The Experiences of A Catholic

Theologian," *Communio: International Catholic Review* II, no. 4 (1984), 404-14 for a powerful testimony to the need to be faithful to the church's teaching on analogy.

19 Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 501; See also 'Mary as Mediatrix' in *The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary*, ed. H. Anderson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 311-326; "Saints and Mary," *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Volume II, eds. Francis Schussler-Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); "The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women," *Horizons* 12/1 (1985): 116-13; "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:2 (Spring 1985): 312-335

20 This is vividly recorded in a widespread iconography of the Madonna of Mercy sometimes called the Madonna of the Protective Mantle. See for example the statue the "Madonna of Mercy" from Museo Nazionale, Firenze and "Vierge ouvrante," Musée des Thermes et de l'Hotel de Cluny, Paris. The latter is also trinitarian symbol in which the Marian figure replaces the Holy Spirit.

21 *God the Father of Mercy*, 73-4.

22 Ibid., 74-75.

23 Ibid., 75.

24 Ibid., 77.

25 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 36.

26 See *Woman and Man*, 214, 219, 228, 288, 325.

Notes

1 *Woman and Man, One in Christ Jesus: Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia*, prepared by the Research Management Group (Australia: HarperCollinsReligious, 1999), 373.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 97. Emphasis added. This is followed by the further significant observation: "If the number of references to the current use of exclusive

Prov 31:10–31: A Wise Woman or Personified Wisdom

Alice Sinnott

Introduction

Appraisals of what makes for a good or bad woman feature throughout Biblical wisdom literature. From very early times, the topic frequently appears in Egyptian and Babylonian instructions generally concerning marriage.¹ In the selection of a wife, men's aspirations regarding family, household, business, and occupation dictated in no small measure the qualities sought. These coincided largely with those attributed to the good women spoken of so often in traditional wisdom. A persistent feature of Proverbs is a preoccupation with female figures as is evident in the many references to women: "the wife of your youth" (5:18) "neighbor's wife" (6:29); "a good wife" (12:4; 31:10); "a wife" (18:22); "a wife's quarrelling" (19:13); "a prudent wife" (19:14); "your mother's teaching" (1:8; 6:20); "mother" (4:3; 10:1; 15:20; 19:26; 20:20; 23:22,25; 28:24; 29:15; 30:11,17; 31:1). Proverbs 1–9 provides several descriptions of "bad" women whom those who seek wisdom must avoid. Choosing between the invitations of Wisdom and Folly² is parallel to a choice between life and death. With so many examples of "wicked women" in Proverbs 1–9, the portrayal of the "woman of worth who fears the Lord" at the conclusion to Proverbs brings some balance to the book.

This central character in Prov 31:10–31, is, in all respects, the opposite of the "wicked women" depicted in chapters 1–9. While many have traditionally regarded this text as embodying the notion of the "good woman" who was the essential spouse for any man seeking wisdom, other scholars have argued that this character is personified Wisdom herself or may be an afterthought in Proverbs, a portrayal of the activities of the "perfect housewife," and the "Golden ABC" for the ideal wife. Some have claimed that the poem is dominated by the acrostic form, and has little theological import.³ In recent years, various scholars have

reassessed the significance of this poem. Several favor the notion that Prov 31:10–31 is a depiction of personified Wisdom that concludes the portrayal of Wisdom, and rounds off her portrayal in chapters 1–9.⁴ Other interpretations range from those which regard this poem as a depiction of how girls were to be trained in the ancient world, to a portrayal of a "worthy wife" echoing in some ways portrayals in comparative Greek literature.⁵

J. Hausmann⁶ suggests that the text itself moves through several levels. It does make use of many qualities/activities of the ideal (from the man's point of view) Israelite woman /wife, but exaggerates these and their unattainability (for both men and women). Because of this, one becomes aware that something more/else must also be intended. That something, claims Hausmann, is Wisdom herself, the ultimate subject of the poem, as the many points of contact between it and the terms and images applied to wisdom elsewhere in Proverbs make clear. Jacob also regards this figure as a symbol for Wisdom, and sees the mention of her spouse in v. 23 as indicating that wisdom is a quality of government.⁷ Much of what is said about the "woman of worth" here, he notes, exceeds possibilities for any woman, and therefore he concludes that the poem is an allegory, in which the woman of worth is personified Wisdom.

That the portrayal of the woman appears in the concluding chapter of Proverbs is a significant factor and many claim correspondences between chapters 1–9 and 31. McCreesh⁸ and O'Connor⁹ claim that the placement of 31:10–31 as a conclusion to the total collection has significant bearing on how the "woman of worth" is understood. McCreesh argues for a twofold interpretation of 31:10–31—as a final depiction of Wisdom, and as an obvious conclusion to the personification of Wisdom in chapters 1–9. In a comparison with the

discourses in chapters 1, 8, 9, he asserts that “in chapter 31, Wisdom is a faithful wife, and a skilled mistress of her household, finally settled down with her own.”¹⁰ In comparison to the treatment of female characters in the earlier non-Israelite instructions, here the woman has center stage, while her husband, a minor character—mentioned but twice, vv. 23, 28—who in praising his wife, is giving to her what is due to Wisdom from a human being. O’Connor claims that this poem serves as a “summary of the whole Book of Proverbs. Its central character is no typical woman but the Wisdom Woman herself.”¹¹ McCreesh’s view of Wisdom as a faithful wife and skilled mistress of her household ignores the claims made by Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9, where Wisdom’s celestial origins are clear, as is her position as speaker/teacher. Both McCreesh and O’Connor fail to explain the distinctive human characteristics attributed to the “woman of worth.”

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Lichtenstein argues contextually that Prov 31:10–31 is a conclusion to the instruction in 31:1–9.¹² He sees the placement of these two units in sequence as indicative of an intention by the author/redactor to direct the reader’s attention to see this figure as the ideal wife for the future ruler who is addressed in Prov 31:1–9. While the likelihood that this poem was retained to present a portrayal of a suitable wife for the king is remote, Lichtenstein’s claim that the poem outlines the qualities to be sought by the king or ruler in a wife is in keeping with the evidence of early Egyptian and Babylonian wisdom writings. Crook also maintains that the description of the woman of worth is that of an ideal woman, and she accounts for this by assuming that the poem originally served as an instruction model

for young girls/prospective brides, portraying wifely virtues to which they were to aspire.¹³ By drawing on a variety of archaeological sources, she posits a memorandum-type document that young women may have been given while attending school in preparation for marriage. She presupposes a system of instruction outside the home for young women, and bases her argument purporting schools for girls on speculation about possible evidence of schools for boys, an issue on which there is no agreement.¹⁴ Her claim has been disputed by many scholars.¹⁵ Lyons’s claim that the poem portrays a premonarchical matriarch is untenable in terms of the most likely dating for this section of Proverbs. Camp proposes that the female figure in Prov 31:10–31 is not just a portrait of the ideal woman, but through the crystallized vision of the qualities of a real woman, represents “a universal type of wisdom.”¹⁶ She examines the identity of the woman within the larger context of the exalted position of Wisdom as a female figure in Proverbs while accepting that a patriarchal perspective is generally the norm in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ From her findings, she argues that Wisdom is based on actual Israelite women, rather than on any Near Eastern goddess, and proposes that the implied role of Israelite women in Proverbs, and the conditions of society suggested by many sayings reflect the “kingless sociological configuration of the post-exilic era,” when the family in some respects replaced the monarchy as the “defining element” in society. Thus, the woman at the end of the book of Proverbs modulated, for a later audience who had no king, the royal imagery of Proverbs 8.¹⁸ It is within this context that she outlines her hypothesis regarding “the impact of the new social situation (post-exilic) on the position and perceptions of women.”¹⁹

In this chapter, I argue that this character, “the woman of worth,” features unique characteristics that distinguish her from the Wisdom figure and underscore her human activities and her qualities as a woman, albeit an ideal woman. While acknowledging that the “woman of worth” and personified Wisdom share some attributes—both are female characters and both “speak wisdom”—the view advanced here is that the respective characterizations of Wisdom and the “woman of worth” embody very different qualities, which clearly distinguish them one from the other. I shall examine this proposition through a careful reading of the text of Prov

31:10–31 and an appraisal of the relationship of personified Wisdom to the woman of worth.

Interestingly, today this poem is frequently selected by couples for their marriage liturgies. Many Jewish husbands read this poem to their wives on Friday evenings at the beginning of the Sabbath meal. In this article, I shall attempt to engage with the text from several different perspectives to discover some of the ways we may read and understand this text.

A Poem about an Amazing Woman: Prov 31:10–31

I see the text of Prov 31:10–31 portraying the “woman of worth” in eight vignettes, each of which contributes to the total composition of this figure. This figure features unique characteristics, which distinguish her from the Wisdom figure, and underscore her human activities and qualities as a woman, albeit an ideal woman. While acknowledging that the “woman of worth,” and personified Wisdom share some attributes—both are female characters, and both “speak wisdom”—the view advanced here is that the respective characterizations of Wisdom and the “woman of worth” embody very different qualities, which clearly distinguish them one from the other.

Prov 31:10–13

*Who can find a woman of worth?
her value is greater than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good and not harm all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. (31:10–13)*

In this first section, the association of the Hebrew word translated here as “worth” with “woman” is interesting as this term, with its military connotations, is more usually applied to men in the Bible, as in “mighty man/warrior,” “men of valor,” “valiantly” (Judg 6:12; 11:1; 2 Sam 17:10; 1 Chr 5:18; Ps 60:12). Implied in this word (vv. 10, 27), are ideas of worth, ability, strength, vigor, power, and resourcefulness; and these underpin the description of the character of the woman portrayed in this poem.²⁰ The scope and variety of the woman’s

work, the extent of her household and business management, and her physical ability, stamina, and energy demand this quality. “Who can find?” which begins the poem²¹ suggests the notion of a futile search. However, if we consider this verse along with Prov 12:4, which reads like a summary version of this poem, we may notice an optimistic notion of rarity rather than impossibility.²² This question alerts the reader to the necessity for a search to find a “woman of worth.” The “finding a wife” of Prov 18:22 suggests a different notion that carries a more lackluster tone.²³ The question, with its undertones of the frustration and doubt to be overcome in the challenge of finding such an ideal woman, may be addressing young unmarried men, or may lead into a portrayal of an ideal to which

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women must aspire. Allusion to corals highlight and intensify motifs of rarity, value, and uniqueness (jewels or pearls, v. 10b). Evoked here also is the notion of the value of wisdom (cf. Job 28; Prov 3:15). A significant aspect of the value of the jewels derives from their scarcity and the difficulty associated with finding them. Both ideas are associated with the woman of worth.

Interestingly, personified Wisdom is also “more precious than jewels” (Prov 3:5) and “better than jewels” (Prov 8:11). However, Wisdom, who is the speaker in these texts, claims that her instruction and knowledge outclass silver and gold or anything that her hearers may desire. So, while the

phraseology appears similar, the context holds quite a different emphasis. Implied in the woman of worth's rare jewel/pearl like qualities and value is her inestimable value to her husband (vv. 11–12). The Hebrew word that we usually understand as "gain" in this passage could be the Hebrew counterpart of the Arabic proverb, "a clever woman is not without wool," as parallel images in Livy, Jerome, and Claudia's Epitaph, suggest that spinning wool was an esteemed womanly occupation.²⁴

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Interestingly the woman of worth seeks wool and flax. Later in the poem, we hear that she provides clothing for her household and even markets some. Competence is the hallmark of the woman who "works with willing hands" or "with the pleasure of her hands." The precise significance of this phrase is difficult to detect. Suggestions are, "with her willing hands" or "with merry hands."²⁵ All present a highly competent and gifted craftswoman who delights in her valuable handiwork. Dahood's translation perhaps captures the essence of verse 31 with: "She carefully seeks wool and flax, which her hands turn into a work of beauty." Attributing work in flax and wool to this character places her in the company of many ancient women, highlights two of her skills, and emphasizes her wisdom.²⁶

Prov 31:14–16

*She is like the ships of the merchant,
from afar she brings her food.
She rises while it is yet night,
and provides food for her household,*

*and tasks for her maidens.
She considers a field and buys it,
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*

Obtaining and distributing food characterizes the woman of worth who does not depend on local supplies alone, but augments her stores from abroad.²⁷ Here she exemplifies the prudence and careful management associated with the wise person in Proverbs. References to her "house" or "household" (vv. 15, 21, 27) highlight the woman's setting.²⁸ The text does not bear out McKane's claim that the woman does the tasks of a secondary producer and trader who explores and exploits the further possibilities of producing wealth by the husbandry of her husband. There are no references to her husband's work in the poem other than his presence at the gates.

Some scholars see verses 14–15 as reminiscent of Prov 9:1–6, where Wisdom prepares her banquet in her house of seven pillars.²⁹ While Prov 31:10–31 emphasizes the woman's capacity to provide for and maintain "her household," and uses images of food and house that also appear in Prov 9:1–6, the likeness ends here. Food provided by the "woman of worth" in the early morning bears little resemblance to that provided by Wisdom for her banquet. To claim a close parallel between the woman in vv. 14–15, who carries out a daily routine of providing food and tasks for her household, with personified Wisdom's preparation of a banquet of rich food is to stretch references to food and servants out of context. The woman in Prov 31:10–31 shows concern for her household and those who come to her, while Wisdom issues invitations abroad.³⁰ Her house is a place of peace, well-being, industry and successful living.³¹ Her rising before daylight to see that her servants are fed suggests her concern for their welfare, and her desire to supervise the distribution of the rations to forestall potential wastefulness or extravagance. If we accept the suggestion of some scholars that the Hebrew word for "food" here is a corruption of the word for "task," we could read this text as saying that she rises early to allocate her servants their tasks for the day.

Having established how the "woman of worth" begins her daily routine, the scene moves to the outdoors, where her interest and expertise in land

and its cultivation are added to the developing portrait of the woman. References to her sharp eye for business opportunities (v. 16), in which she weighs up the value of a field that has come on the market and decides to buy it, delineate the diligence, steadfastness, and wise business judgement of the woman of worth, who uses the profit from her skill as a craftswoman (v. 13b) as capital for the planting of a vineyard (v. 16).³²

Prov 31:17–19

*She girds her loins with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable,
her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.*

“She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong,” presents an image of the woman’s strength as she prepares to engage in strenuous activity (v. 17), and simultaneously echoes other occurrences of this phrase associated with males.³³ This expression has connotations of ritual, e.g. Passover (Exod 12:11); of actions demanded of those called to prophecy (1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 4:29; 9:1); of commissioning for action (Job 38:3; 40:7; Jer 1:17; Nah 2:1).³⁴ Such occurrences of this phrase place the woman in the company of those participating in Passover and recalls the preparation demanded of Elijah, Elisha, Job, Jeremiah, and Nahum, whom YHWH called to carry out particular tasks. While the work for which the woman of worth “girds her loins with strength” may be spinning and weaving, attending to her household and trading, the description of her preparation connects her activities with the tasks alluded to in the above texts and so places her activity in the realm of activities directed by YHWH.

Following on from the depiction of physical preparation for sustained work, presumably during the hours of daylight, the scene shifts to a night setting, “Her lamp does not go out” (v. 18). McKane, Plöger, and Whybray all interpret v. 18 as suggesting that the woman works through the night. This claim is consistent with the emphasis on her strength and indefatigable industry.³⁵ Several other scholars understand the lit lamp in this text as a sign of righ-

teousness, a notion that is familiar from several biblical references (Prov 13:9; 20:20; Job 18:6; 21:17) “The light of the righteous rejoices but the lamp of the wicked will be put out,” (Prov 13:9; 20:20; 24:20).³⁶ A lighted lamp is also a sign of an inhabited house, while an extinguished lamp signifies a deserted house. In situations where oil was a precious commodity, a lighted lamp would signify the household’s prosperity, since a lighted house is likely to be safe from attack. A lighted dwelling is also a welcome sight at night for the homeless, the traveler, and the needy—of whom we hear in the next stanza. References to the lamp, to her preparedness for physical work, her business sense, her working into the night, to her use of the “distaff” and “spindle” sustains a sense of ongoing activity.

References to her sharp eye for business opportunities, in which she weighs up the value of a field that has come on the market and decides to buy it, delineate the diligence, steadfastness, and wise business judgement of the woman of worth.

Prov 31:20–22

*She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
She makes herself coverings,
her clothing (is) fine linen and purple. (Prov 31:20–22)*

Activities aimed towards profit and personal comfort are combined here with care of the poor and needy. A sharp shift from the depiction of the woman as one who spins, weaves, and takes advantage of the market to her characterization as one who attends to the needs of her household, the poor, and the needy, is effected by continuing the

image of the woman's hands. The poet, while emphasizing the woman's care for the immediate household and the tasks necessary for daily life, now introduces the extended Deuteronomic teaching of "she opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hand to the needy" (Ps 72:1-4, 12-14). In "opening her hand to the poor," she may be giving alms, or providing warm clothing for the poor as she does for her household. She does not fear should snow come, as they are clothed in scarlet (v. 21). The word translated here as "scarlet" has been much debated. Some have emended the text to read "double" suggesting that a double set of clothes is better protection against the snow than

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scarlet clothes.³⁷ Others favor scarlet, as do I. The emphasis in both verses of the text is on quality rather than quantity, perhaps suggesting royal purple or red. As we know, warmth is guaranteed more by quality than by quantity. I believe it fits the general context, as the woman of worth herself is clothed in fine linen and purple, which are considered signs of wealth and nobility. Several early Fathers of the Church, for example, Ambrose and Hilary of Poitiers, understood this word to be "scarlet" and saw the color as fitting their allegorical interpretations. The obvious wealth of the provider of the garments seems to suggest that she would use the best and warmest fabric for her servants' winter clothing. We also know from the text that she spins wool, so has ready access to the raw material. Her household is protected against the cold

throughout the winter nights as she makes her own coverlets (v. 22).

Prov 31:23-25

*Her husband is known at the gates,
when he sits among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells (them),
she delivers girdles to the merchants.
Strength and dignity her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.*

This section portrays "her husband" in a setting that befits the spouse of a "woman of worth." His status at the gates is clearly linked to involvement and success of the woman of worth in the world of work and commerce. The woman of worth is not only a perfect and efficient wife and business woman but is endowed with all the virtues of the wise person according to Proverbs. While clothing has been alluded to earlier (v. 22), here her garments are qualities associated with an authority figure.³⁸ Her outward appearance denotes a role of leadership and prosperity. In enumerating the attributes of an idealized Israelite woman, who is clearly a mother, her children are mentioned (v. 28, perhaps in v. 15), as is her concern "for her household" (twice in v. 21). McKane limits the meaning of verse 25 to economic prosperity, but this interpretation overlooks the qualities of the woman that are the concern of this text. Verse 24 closes the praise of her economic competence and verse 25 begins the lauding of her personal virtues, "strength and dignity."

Prov 31:26-28

*She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness (is) on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and she does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed, and her husband praises
her.*

"Wisdom" and "torah" are an explicit part of the vocabulary of this figure as she "speaks with wisdom" and the "and teaching of loving kindness" is "on her tongue" (v. 26).³⁹ As she has prepared for winter by building up ample supplies of food and

ensuring that her household is warmly accoutered, she faces the future laughingly. The Hebrew word translated “strength” in verse 25 has military connotations, as does the Hebrew word used in verses 10 and 29. In this context, it suggests that the woman’s abstract qualities are also exercised with great skill, dignity, and strength—in the manner of a warrior perhaps—as she also teaches wisdom and loving-kindness.

By characterizing her as banishing the “bread of idleness” from her house (v. 27) with an account of her wise and compassionate speech, the author suggests a clear connection between her wisdom and loving kindness and her care for her household.⁴⁰ Material and moral connotations are implied here and are developed in vv. 26–27.⁴¹ Wolters, who devotes an article to v. 27, notes that the verb form here can also be translated “she watches over” or “supervises.”⁴² This interpretation stretches beyond the Hebrew text, and assumes that the community in which it arose knew Greek sufficiently well to grasp puns. In addition, it implies an improbably late date for this section of Proverbs. For a Hebrew writer to grasp and use a Greek pun, the date for this text would have to be well after the spread of Hellenistic culture, following Alexander the Great. It also seems odd that the author of an acrostic poem should have employed such an abstruse construction when an acrostic was very probably intended to assist easy recall. As vv. 26–29 are clearly concerned with speech and the use of the tongue—topics frequently addressed in Proverbs and throughout wisdom literature—the bread of idleness here alludes to idle talk, destructive speech, and gossip, all of which are behaviors of the unwise that are proscribed in the woman’s household (cf. v. 15).⁴³

Prov 31:29–31

*Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.
Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain.
A woman who fears YHWH is to be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her at the gates.*

As so many qualities and forms of behavior called for in the injunctions throughout the wisdom writings have been attributed to the woman of worth, it

is not surprising that the author moves in the final verses to an enumeration of the praise bestowed on this woman by those who know and experience her gifts. Beginning this section is the sole reference to the children of the woman of worth. They are portrayed as beginning the litany of praise, “they rise up and call her blessed” (cf. “On the lips of children and of babes” Psalm 8). Her husband, who has been mentioned twice previously (vv. 11, 23), “sings her praises,” and to his praise is added the extended praise of either the author, or the husband, or both (v. 29), “you surpass them all.” This may be, as

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perhaps—as she also teaches
wisdom and loving-kindness.**

Plöger notes, the highest acknowledgement that the husband can give his wife⁴⁴ or may be intended as the praise of the author and by implication of the reader.⁴⁵ Verse 29 here describes the achievements of “many women,” and emphasizes the common ground shared by the woman of worth and the many other women who have “done excellently.”

Concluding the litany of praise is the enigmatic vv. 30–31. Several interpretations are possible, for example, “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, in a woman the fear of YHWH is to be praised.” Another possibility could read “a woman in whom is the fear of YHWH.” This apparent warning about the transitoriness of appearances and beauty offers an antithesis in the second half, namely, that the woman is to be praised, not because of her beauty, but because of her uprightness. Some have suggested that the “fear of YHWH” is mentioned to give the poem a religious aspect and that v. 30b is a late emendation. These verses are unlikely to be a later editorial insertion, as such a change would have demanded further alterations to retain the alphabetic ordering of this poem.⁴⁶ The debate surrounding this verse hinges on three

factors: 1) its problematic syntax; 2) the fact that it is the only explicit reference to YHWH in the poem; and 3) it is the longest verse in the poem. Some scholars argue that since this is purely a "secular" poem, the brief reference to the fear of YHWH is incongruous and cannot be original (cf. Job 28:28). This notion arises from the mistaken view, implied by some scholars, that sacred and secular were two quite separate spheres in the thought of the ancient world. Such a division was not likely to have been operating in the world in which Prov 31:1–31 emerged, where life experience was not compartmentalized.

Verses 29–31 laud the woman of worth for her practical, artistic, creative, and business skills. These are the very qualities named in Proverbs as the characteristics of wise people. So it is not surprising that she also is credited with the hallmark of the wise person, "the fear of YHWH." Her faithfulness may also be understood as a sign of the faithfulness of YHWH. Jacob's understanding of v. 30 as the key to interpreting 31:10–31 seems accurate, as is his claim that the fear of YHWH is an articulation of wisdom in action. It is surprising to hear human works being praised as the works of the woman are in v. 31, "her works praise her at the gates." The works of YHWH are praised, and thanks are rendered to the One who accomplishes them (Pss 19:1–4; 145:10), and the "fruit of YHWH's work" satisfies the earth (Ps 104:13; cf. Prov 31:31) but

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here the husband is instructed to give his wife the fruit of her hands. This portrayal may have been directed specifically to those in need of guidance in choosing a wife.

A line (e.g., v. 30) of unusual length in a poem, which is otherwise regular in meter, can be a

deliberate device that marks the conclusion of a stanza or poem, may signal a climax, or may denote emphasis.⁴⁷ This factor supports the argument that v. 30, far from being a token religious reference, out of tune with Prov 31:10–31 as a whole, is the climax of the poem. Its length emphasizes the importance and comprehensiveness of the woman's virtues, while simultaneously changing pace to bring the list to completion. It is possible that the imperative in v. 31, "Give her of the fruit of her hands," follows a hymnic form used in works for performance in public. The final verse commands praise for this figure who "fears the Lord." It is as if this final accolade portrays the woman as the embodiment of the characteristic proclaimed as integral to wisdom in the first chapter of Proverbs: "The fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7).⁴⁸ It also completes the litany of praise for the woman of worth. Praising the woman of worth "at the gates" (v. 31), suggests that she is praised in the place where judgement is given by the elders, so her praise is awarded in justice and on her own merits. Perhaps we also get an inkling here that her husband's position at the gates is connected with her works.

Is the Woman of Worth Personified Wisdom?

Recent studies espousing the view that this poem portrays personified Wisdom prompted my analysis of Prov 31:10–31 and raised the question concerning the identity of this figure. While the structure and literary characteristics of the poem point to a symbolic level of meaning, rather than to a job description for a housewife, it does not follow that the woman of worth is therefore a symbol for Wisdom.

A change of tone is noticeable in Prov 31:10–31, as the author/redactor switches from the reprimanding tone of much of the Book of Proverbs to one of praise for the accomplishments of this extraordinary character. Within the disciplined constraints of an acrostic, the poet portrays, with astute attention to detail, the figure of a wise "woman of substance" who has a large and well-run household. Such a figure is in keeping with Israelite society's expectation that most adult men and women would marry. Incarnated in the "woman of worth," is the type of woman to be sought by men

who aspired to marriage. It is assumed in this society that those hearing this instruction would also regard the pursuit of wisdom as their goal, so the "woman of worth" as portrayed in 31:10–31 must surely have been the epitome of the aspirations and yearnings of the most idealistic of males.

By specifying alphabetically her capabilities, talents, and virtues, the poet succeeds in painting a recognizable, but barely credible portrait of a woman whose consistent and creative work is the source of wealth, security, and status for her husband, children, and servants. While the human qualities of the woman of worth are stressed, the female imagery is highly idealized. No human frailties are mentioned, so the picture is that of an ideal woman/wife presented from a male perspective. Coming as the conclusion to Proverbs, the poem, with its carefully balanced structure, acrostic form, and hymn-like qualities, describes, in remarkably favorable terms, the ideal wife, recalls what is said about wives in the sentence literature, and recommends the ideal woman to unmarried men in the Israelite community.⁴⁹ Since advice concerning the discipline essential for the fruitful pursuit of wisdom and its full enjoyment was probably intended for unmarried men, it may be deduced that Prov 31:10–31 presents the ideal wife as the woman of worth who opens her mouth with wisdom, and has the teaching of loving kindness on her tongue (v. 26). This female character embodies an array of human qualities, abilities, skills, and accomplishments greater than those likely to exist in any one woman that a wise man might hope to find.

Most striking is the total focussing of Prov 31:10–31 on one female character—the "woman of worth"—who as wife and mother is one among many female figures in Proverbs.⁵⁰ This "woman who fears the Lord" (31:30), contrasts sharply with other female figures in Proverbs, such as: "the strange woman" (2:16; 5:3, 20a); "foreign/strange/alien woman" (5:20b; 6:24b; 23:27); "evil woman" (6:24a; 7:5); "foolish woman" (9:13); "beautiful woman without discretion" (11:22); "contentious woman" (25:24; 27:15); "woman dressed as a harlot" (7:10); and "harlot" (6:26; 23:27; 29:3). Female figures in Proverbs are dynamic and central, while often almost no mention is made of husbands, fathers, or protectors. With 31:1–9, which sums up the earlier teaching about

kings, the poem functions as a coda for the whole book, drawing together its main themes under the image of the "woman of worth."⁵¹

The poem sums up the many themes running through various sections of the text—the importance of the acquisition of wisdom, the absolute contrasts between the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked and their respective fates, the need to choose the right way and the conse-

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quences of the choices made—and offers choices that are part of the larger and fundamental choice—that of choosing Wisdom. A woman who surpasses all human expectations is presented as the concrete illustration of the blessing in store for those who choose Wisdom and reject Folly. Simultaneously it forms the climax of the book, and rounds it off by recalling a principal theme, the search for wisdom, outlined in Proverbs 1–9. This closing section of the book of Proverbs, could perhaps be more accurately described as an epilogue, positioned thus to ensure that it is read as the culmination to the search for Wisdom advocated throughout Proverbs, while structurally it functions as an illuminating finale for the entire book.

Stylistically, the repetition of female imagery in poetic form at the beginning (Prov 1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–6) and the end (Prov 31:10–31) creates a literary framework within which the book is shaped.⁵² This imagery assumes great significance in the portrayals of both personified Wisdom and the "woman of worth." Textual evidence suggests that while these two figures are fine blends of

shared and unique features—hardly surprising as they are central wisdom figures in Proverbs—each is quite distinct and unique. Both are cast as female and to each is attributed a teaching role—personified Wisdom appears as a teacher who gives her teaching in public places (Prov 1:20–33), whereas the woman of worth “opens her mouth with wisdom” (Prov 31:26) in her household—and both are the objects of a search as denoted by the verb “find” which conveys a significant motif in Proverbs. The opening line “Who can find a woman of worth?” (v. 10, cf. 12:4; 18:22) highlights the rarity associated with the woman about to be described, reminds the

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audience of the search for Wisdom (Prov 1:22; 3:3; 4:22; 8:17, 35), and recalls that those who “find” her will be “happy” and will find “life.”

Interestingly, “find” is used also to denote the adulteress’s search—which if successful, spells destruction for young men (7:15)—whereas the woman of worth exemplifies the virtues lauded throughout Proverbs. If one reads Proverbs right through, the conclusion is that to find the “woman of worth” one must search for Wisdom, avoid Folly, become a faithful lover of Wisdom, and so find the unparalleled reward of a woman of worth.

Wisdom in Proverbs is primarily a speaker in public places—at the city gates, in the streets, on the walls, by the road or path. In marked contrast to Wisdom, the woman of worth is an idealized human figure to whom speech is attributed but once, “she opens her mouth with wisdom.” Completing this picture of excellence is the reference to her care for the poor and needy (v. 20) who approach her at home. She is clothed in strength and dignity, speaks with wisdom and loving kindness (v. 26); is proficient in all aspects of human life deemed

essential by the author and his audience; this woman is a wife and mother (v. 28) who spins, weaves, produces handcrafts, buys and sells, chooses and purchases land, plants a vineyard, trades in the market, imports food, ensures adequate food supplies and warm clothing, manages the household, and works tirelessly. References to the woman’s household, maids, spinning, weaving, buying and selling, her husband seated at the city gates, and her children, place her in the world of human beings. Her household depends on her for nourishment, clothing, and daily tasks (vv. 15, 21, 27). She herself is never idle, as her lamp burns late into the night (vv. 13–15, 18, 27). A family portrait completes her embodiment as a female human being, with a husband and children, who sing her praises. A reflection on the reasons why she is worthy of praise brings the song to its conclusion.

At the beginning of Proverbs, a female figure—personified Wisdom—“cries out” at the entrance to the city gates (v. 21), and in the final chapter the plea, “let her works praise her at the gates” (v. 31) is made concerning the woman of worth. Location, voice, and praise serve to unite the beginning and end of Proverbs as the voice of the female character—Wisdom and the works of a female character—“woman of worth” call for attention at the city gates, thus connecting personified Wisdom with the “woman of worth.” The location of the woman of worth in a home setting at the end of the book of Proverbs, alerts the audience, which presumably did not have a king, land, or Temple, about how “fear of the Lord” will be maintained in the community. In this poem, the reader is given an alphabetical list of the way of wisdom on the everyday level, although that human level, represented in female imagery, is a highly idealized one.

The positioning of the poem at the end of Proverbs defines it as the final word, thus calling attention to its content, and ensuring that it is remembered and carried out. The final form of the book of Proverbs can be envisaged as a scroll that begins with the female figure of personified Wisdom calling out in public places for all to listen to her words and concludes with another female figure, an ideal woman who is the embodiment of a life lived according to wisdom—but they are not a single figure.



Notes

- 1 From third millennium BCE onwards, see *Plahhotep*, *ANET* (Princeton, 1968): 412–14.
- 2 Folly is represented by “the foreign woman,” “the adventurer,” “the woman whose husband is away.”
- 3 Toy, *Proverbs* (1899): 542; Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament* (1965): 476; McKane, *Proverbs* (1970): 666–7.
- 4 E. Jacob, “Sagesse et alphabet, A propos de Proverbes 31:10–31” in A. Caquot, M. Philonenko, eds. *Hommages à André Dupont* (Paris, 1971): 291; O. Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)* BKAT (Neukirchen, 1984): 372; Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine* (1985): 191–194; T. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31” *RB* 92 (1985): 25–27; E. L. Lyons, “A Note on Proverbs 31:10–31” in *LH* (1987): 237; K. O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* MBS 5 (Wilmington, 1988): 77–78; J. Hausmann, “Beobachtungen zu Spr 31:10–31” in J. Hausmann & H. J. Zobel, eds. *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und Biblische Theologie; Festschrift für Horst Dietrich Preuß zum 65. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne, 1992): 261–266; R. J. Clifford, “Woman Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs” in G. Braulik, et al. eds. *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien, 1993): 61, 72.
- 5 M. B. Crook, “The Marriageable Maiden of Prov. 31:10–31” *JNES* 13 (1954): 137–140. K. Luke, “The Ideal Wife (Prov 31:10–31)” *Jeev* 2 (1991): 118–132; M. Waegeman, “The Perfect Wife of Proverbs 31:10–31” in K. D. Schunck & M. Augustin eds. *Goldene Äpfel in silbernen Schalen: Collected Communications of XIII Congress of IOSOT* (Leuven, 1989): 101–107.
- 6 Hausmann, “Beobachtungen zu Spr 31:10–31” (1992): 261–266.
- 7 Jacob, “Sagesse” (1971): 287–295, esp., 288–90.
- 8 Camp, *Wisdom* (1985): 183–91; McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife” (1985): 25; Whybray, *Composition* (1994): 159–161.
- 9 O’Connor, *Wisdom* (1988): 77.
- 10 McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife” (1985): 46.
- 11 O’Connor, *Wisdom Literature* (1988): 77.
- 12 M. H. Lichtenstein, “Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 202–211.
- 13 Crook, “Marriageable Maiden” (1954): 137–140. Luke, *Ideal Wife* (1991), presents a similar notion when he describes the background of this poem as that of training girls in the ancient world, and concludes his analysis of the poem with some Indian parallels.
- 14 The issue of whether or not there were schools in Israel and the possibility that if they existed they may have been centers of wisdom teaching has been much debated. See J. L. Crenshaw, “Education in Ancient Israel.” *JBL* 104 (1985) 601–15; R.N. Whybray, “The Sage in the Israelite Court,” in *SIANE* (1990): 133–40, writes “There is little doubt in my mind . . . that some parts of Proverbs, especially parts of chaps. 1–9 and 22:17–24:22, were composed as textbooks for young pupils—though not necessarily at a royal scribal school”; Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (1994): 132 ff.
- 15 McKane, *Proverbs* (1970): 666, disputes her claim, as the poem does not have the form of an Instruction, so the scholastic claim is speculation; Jacob, “Sagesse” (1970): 288, questions the existence of such a memorandum as no textual evidence for it exit, likewise Plöger, *Sprüche* (1984): 377.
- 16 Camp, *Wisdom* (1985): 93, 191; A. Barucq *Le Livre des Proverbes* (Paris, 1964): 233.
- 17 Camp, *Wisdom* (1985): 290.
- 18 Camp, *Wisdom* (1985): 96.
- 19 C. A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9,” in P. L. Day, *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, 1989): 142–160, notes that the discourse of the long introduction is strikingly concerned with women: “Talk about women and women’s speech occupies an astonishing amount of the text—men preoccupied with speech, talking about women and women’s speech.”
- 20 The word translated “worth” here is translated “good” in RSV, “virtuous” in KJV, “of noble character” in NIV, “capable” in NEB, JB, NRSV.
- 21 Camp, *Wisdom* (1985): 96 says: “Conjecturally, one might even imagine that an original description of the ‘woman of worth’ as ‘a woman of understanding’ in 31:10 (so LXX) was changed by the final redactor to ‘a woman who fears YHWH’ to avoid placing her in the same exalted royal frame of reference as Woman Wisdom, who is called ‘understanding’ in 8:14.”
- 22 Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos* (1963): 112, regards this question as rhetorical.
- 23 “Find” is also used of acquiring Wisdom in Prov 1:28; 3:13; 8:35; Job 28:12,13.
- 24 Livy, *Books I and II* (Loeb Classical Library, London, 1919) 198. Lucretia is discovered working with wool; *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae in Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* LVI: (recensuit Isidorus Hilberg, Pt. iii, Letter cxxviii) 16; “lanifica et ea tantum loquens quae animum puellarum ad virtutem instituant.” *Corp. Inscr. Lat.*, 1, 2: 1211: Claudia domum serviat, lanam fecit (kept her house, and spun wool). My attention was drawn to these references by Winton Thomas’s article ‘Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,’ *VTSup* 3 (1955): 292.
- 25 L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* 2 (Leiden, 1958): 321 col. 2 and Gemser, *Sprüche* (1963): 112.
- 26 References to her use of the distaff and spindle in verse 19 suggest that she spins wool and flax.

- 27 Toy, *Proverbs* (1899): 544.
- 28 McKane, *Proverbs* (1970): 667.
- 29 Barucq, *Proverbs* (1964): 23,1, suggests the possibility that the portrait of the woman of worth has been set in parallel with that of personified Wisdom in 9:1–6, in that both are “expert mistresses of the house.”
- 30 Whybray, noting that the house is the setting for 31:10–31 suggests that the final editor intended the reader to see Wisdom as the builder of her own house (9:1; 14:1) to which she invites her guests (9:3–6). *Proverbs* (1994): 426.
- 31 The house of the woman of worth contrasts with that of Folly and the “strange woman.” Barucq, *Proverbs* (1964): 235, claims that one of the wife’s functions is to preserve her husband from the strange woman (woman folly).
- 32 See *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 1318.
- 33 McKane, *Proverbs* (1970): 668; Whybray, *Proverbs* (1994): 428 both see this line as describing the tucking up of a garment with a belt in preparation for some activity requiring prolonged effort.
- 34 “For work” is added in the LXX. An alternative phrasing could be “summons the strength of her arms,” an idea expressed in Amos 2:14; Nah 2:1.
- 35 Toy, (1899): 544; Gemser, (1963): 108; Plöger, (1984): 372, 377; McKane, (1970): 668 interprets v. 18 as meaning that the woman discerns trading conditions to be good, and so works through the night to take full advantage of the market while it lasts. Plöger’s reading is similar as he claims that the woman’s physical strength stands her in good stead, and the success of her work spurs on her enthusiasm so that she works through the night.
- 36 Toy, (1899): 544; Gemser, (1963): 108. It is unlikely that the expression “her lamp does not go out” (v. 18) signifies the woman’s righteousness, nor can it be connected to the other biblical references which denote the putting out of the lamp of the wicked (Prov 13:9; 20:20; 24:20).
- 37 This change does not alter the consonants of the Hebrew text. The Vulgate and LXX supports this vocalization. See also BHS v. 21a; Toy, *Proverbs* (1899): 544; Gemser, *Sprüche* (1963): 110; H. Ringgren, *Sprüche/Praediger*, (Göttingen, 1962): 168; Barucq, *Le Livre des Proverbes* (1964): 232; Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, (1965): 185; McKane, *Proverbs* (1970): 668; Plöger, *Sprüche* (1984): 372.
- 38 Plöger, *Sprüche* (1984): 378. Ringgren sees the allusion to her clothing as a reference to her nobility of spirit. Ringgren, *Sprüche/Praediger* (1947): 169.
- 39C. Meyers, “To Her Mother’s House” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis* (Cleveland, 1991): 48, notes that the phrase “teaching of loving-kindness” picks up on the association of the mother with instruction—“your mother’s teaching”—found in Prov 1:8; 6:20, 23. So the maternal instructional role is mentioned four times in Proverbs, once more than is the equivalent paternal teaching role; J. H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed. The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1977): 108, claims that “the motif of the wise wife reflected a commonplace reality in ancient Israelite culture.”
- 40 The NRSV reading of v. 27 as “She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness” is, I believe, in harmony with the “woman of worth,” as she has been depicted throughout this poem.
- 41 Ringgren (1967): 121.
- 42 A. Wolters, “*Sôpiyyā* (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia” *JBL* 94 (1985): 577.
- 43 Scott’s translation of v. 27b “and permits no one to eat food in idleness,” is at odds with the characterization of the woman of worth so far. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (1965): 184.
- 44 Plöger (1984): 379.
- 45 Barucq (1964): 233 says that the praise of the woman of worth may have come from oriental wisdom “a universal type of wisdom” but the author has integrated it into a Yahwistic context as the woman who “fears YHWH” (v. 30). He sees this text and Genesis 2 as a rehabilitation of women in Israel. See also H. Duesberg & P. Auvray, *Le Livre des Proverbes* 2 (1956): I 97–99.
- 46 Toy, *Proverbs* (1899): 548; Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos* (1984): 379. Becker noted that “fear of YHWH” sayings are embedded in the poems about women in Proverbs (Prov 1:29; 8:13; 31:30), “the work as a whole thus receives an inclusion or a bracketing through the motif of the fear of God.” J. Becker (1965): 211.
- 47 Gemser and Baumgartner regard the Masoretic Text reading as incongruous. Plöger notes the possibility that the whole verse in this reading may have been substituted for a different original. See also Baumgartner, “Die israelitische Weisheitsliteratur” *ThR* 5 (1933) 277, and Whybray, *Proverbs* (1994): 155.
- 48 Sirach 44–49 rereads Proverbs with a different spirit, and at the end of his work, he praises the deeds of the elders.
- 49 Wolters (1988): 446–457.
- 50 A persistent feature of Proverbs is a preoccupation with female figures, as can be seen in the numerous references to women: “wife of your youth” (5:18) “neighbor’s wife” (6:29); “a good wife” (12:4; 31:10); “a wife” (18:22); “a wife’s quarrelling” (19:13); “a prudent wife” (19:14); “your mother’s teaching” (1:8; 6:20); “mother” (4:3; 10:1; 15:20; 19:26; 20:20; 23:22,25; 28:24; 29:15; 30:11,17; 31:1).
- 51 Lichtenstein (1982): 202–211.
- 52 Camp (1985): 207.

Memories as Mystery

Paula M. Smith R.S.M.

Reflections

I took a walk along the banks of the Ross River in Townsville in northern Queensland recently. The day clear sunshine. The water mirror still. Reflections from the bridge spread darkly in the water. I marveled at the clarity of the shadow, the dark pool of bridge shape, double to reflect the twin bridges built to cater to the extended traffic in this part of the city. The outline and the details in the water depicted the underside of the structures, the invisible linking arches and pylons, my casual glance could not know. The shadows changed pattern as the cars moved across the road. Phantom cars in the water, upside-down moving beetles of dusky silence, disturbing the clear line of the boundary of the images.

The reflections in the water revealing more than I noted as I watched the bridge itself.

Strength of the sunshine, stillness of the water, mid afternoon when shadows are easily formed, the space around me: all contributing to the wonder of the form, the shape and the movement in the water.

Memories, opened in the daylight of conscious choice, reflected in the still waters of contemplation and prayer have been like these bridge reflections in my life recently. Memories of shadow aspects of my life, of tears, illness, alienation and suffering had for many years lurked in the back-

ground of consciousness. I have lived a fairly normal life as a teacher and administrator. So I usually dismissed them in my busyness as instances of weakness, inadequacy. They stayed.

Courage to unearth some of these remembered times, describe them for myself, test them against scripture and great writings, has recently brought new interpretations, new understandings, other ways of judging these moments. I found a method of writing the other/ other self.

Once we have begun to re-discover a given situation—its smells, sounds, emotions, thoughts, attitudes—the situation itself draws us back into the past, freeing us for a time from notions of our present superiority over our past selves; it allows us to become once again the child—a stranger—whom we once were. With some astonishment, we find ourselves discerning linkages never perceived before; forgotten traces, abandoned intentions, lost desires and so on.

Like the newness of the images of the bridges' underside, the memories that emerge are different from those of my expectations. Shadows not fearful, but expressive of hidden potential, there waiting to be acknowledged. The patterns emerging, freeing me from the earlier defi-

nitions of identity, of what I considered it means to be a Sister of Mercy, a woman religious at this time at the very end of the millennium. The shadow unexpectedly different, powerful, and alive with new meaning.

The time is 1953, when as a novice I began to know some of the implications of my vow of chastity. I write the memory as an incident in its own right, in the present tense to give it immediacy. I name the young novice I was just learning to be Emma. She lives through the experience of my memory with its contradictions, ambiguities, and unvoiced body awareness.¹

The language of the memory is explicit, embodied, voicing many of the issues of sexual awareness on which silence was assumed to be an imperative. I endeavor in the reconstruction of the memory to avoid making judgments that belong to later times after the memory. The insights in the memory are those I tap when I ponder the specific time that asks to be remembered, re-constructed, re-ordered. Such memories are dangerous². They risk questioning of boundaries.

Do not let yourself get caught in the details of the memory itself. It's a framing of my initial interpretation. It's the obvious part of the shadow. There

are further patterns and possibilities there if contemplation is allowed time and space.

Following the reconstruction of the memory, I take a different voice, a second voice. Note the shift. Follow me into this second voice. Here I'm the researcher linking theory (specifically post-structuralist feminism³), literature, and the memory.

Your growing knowledge of religious life may depend upon the exposure of a fragile moment in a past memory of your own.

This second voice is my first analysis, an intuitive, poetic response to acknowledge the tears I find in the memory. I endeavor to articulate some of the mystery I now find in the reflection. New understandings of compassion and mercy in my life, gentleness with myself in the wonder of these new meanings and a sense of awe in the presence of the woman who is this embodied mercy woman, surprise me as I write. This woman gently acknowledging her tears, her vulnerability, and the challenges of being a celibate woman religious.

The third voice I use in the last section of the paper makes another shift in language. It's a different form of reflexivity. It is attempting to ask some of the questions that open out from personal awareness such as this reflection has brought with it. They concern the challenges of new forms of community, the inadequacy of language to express compassion in a world torn apart by sexual assault, consumer violence, and brutality as we have

seen in East Timor in these last weeks, and the continuing challenge of Catherine McAuley's story⁴ for so many of us in our ministry of mercy.

I invite you as reader to come into the experience of these three voices with me. Let the memory speak to you. Let my different forms of analysis take you into your own ques-

tions. Ponder the possibilities, the new awarenesses. Let the God of mercy and compassion into your own vulnerable spaces. Your growing knowledge of religious life may depend upon the exposure of a fragile moment in a past memory of your own.

Consider the new possibilities for interpretation I suggest in the different sections of the paper. As you read, you become the writer, the meaning maker. Your questions will go beyond those I ask so haltingly. Together, we reflect the hidden patterns of mercy and compassion in our world. Together, we take the application of Catherine's story into the new millennium.

The Memory:

There are six beds on the back balcony at the Novitiate. Younger novices have moved to them to allow the young Junior Professed Sisters, who have come home for the holidays, beds in the dormitories. This Christmas,

Emma, one of those sleeping on the balcony, loves to climb into bed, look out to the back paddock. On Christmas morning, it had been light very early, long grasses swaying in swathes of waves in the early morning light through the glass of the large sliding windows. She is enjoying this new sleeping place. More open than her normal dormitory spot.

One evening between Christmas and New Year, she wishes for greater privacy than the spaces between each bed allow. Pulling the curtains with relief, she crawls into bed, leaves it to one of the others to turn off the light. Grateful for a private space no one else can invade. She lies quietly. The aching tension in her limbs making them tight, taut as violin strings, expressed in her heels against the sheets. The tension that has gained in her body over the last few days unbearable. Overwhelming. She holds back the tears that have brimmed to her eyes time and again today no longer. Noiselessly, she lets the dammed-up flow release. She reaches out to the handkerchief supply in the top drawer of her bedside cupboard. Each small piece of fabric proving inadequate. Scrunched up, sopping, dropped to the floor with its predecessors. The pillow almost as wet as the handkerchiefs in no time.

The cramps that have tightened in her stomach all day slowly easing, the blood flowing as abundantly as the tears. Just as well, she is dressed for her periods even though it has been ten months since they visited her last. She guessed that pain was premenstrual. Can stretch her

body at last, not find it doubling with aches that stay for hours. The growing softness in her limbs much more welcome than the tightness of the past few days. Her thoughts going to the situation that prompted the tears, she feels sorry for herself, begins to cry again, those quiet, plopping tears that roll down her cheeks, onto her pillow, down her neck. Crying because she loves someone so much, but cannot tell her—that someone seeming to love someone else rather than her. Such distress.

She and Terri have been friends since long before the time they both entered the convent. Terri her sister Yvonne's friend at school. Red haired, tomboy. Played basketball. She, Emma, and Ruth, who had left a few weeks after she entered the convent, have been postulants together. Much of it fun time. The day they stole the strawberries from the vegetable garden at the Mount one of those times.

They didn't know that the meeting they were not allowed to attend was held in the Community Room, its wide bay windows facing the vegetable garden. The whole community, meeting on serious business known as Monthly Chapter (when Sisters accused themselves in public of faults they saw themselves as committing) listening to the litany of self accusations against the background of three vigorous young postulants, joking, eating strawberries they were forbidden to touch in the gardens through the windows. No one had dared to laugh, but it had been a difficult time to

refrain from doing so, some of them would later tell Emma.

Her friendship with Terri always full of contradiction. It has grown over this year as each has begun to appreciate the other. Both now young novices with the added presence of Martine, (clever, questioning, small, inquisitive, much more vocal than either of them on public matters), now a close friend too. They disagree with one another on most issues, but come to respect the others' opinions if time allows them to talk out the differences. They've become a strong threesome.

The new source of tension, one which Emma cannot control, a strong physical attraction to Terri. She found herself actually trembling when Terri approached yesterday. Could feel quivering throughout her body. It refused to go away. She doesn't understand. All happening so vividly, so quickly. Shaking extending throughout her legs, her arms. Afraid others will notice. She even mentioned it to Sister Alberta, the Novice Mistress. She dismissed it as nothing, laughing at Emma's concern. Emma knows it is because she loves Terri so much. Her whole body participating.

It had been possible to continue with the timetable, pretend to herself that there was nothing to be concerned about until today. She kept herself busy most of the day, even though she felt the warning cramps of menstrual pains early, had presented a smiling face, a cool manner to all at recreation and gardening time this evening. Toward the end of recreation, she had

become aware that Terri was giving all her time to another novice, Justine, as she had for the past few nights. They told one another stories, ribbed one another in an exaggerated way. They were becoming very good friends, Terri giving Justine much of the attention she normally reserved for Emma.

Emma feels alone tonight as she has not done all year. Her first Christmas without the family. Lonely. She is not accustomed to feeling lonely. This strong physical attraction for Terri. Disconcerting, off-putting, preventing her from being in control. She had not even felt like this when she loved the boys she had singled out for attention before she entered the convent. Jealous of Justine and Terri's friendship. She knows it, cannot express it. The tears flow. Each time she thinks about it again. She cries again for her inability to change the situation, do something active to modify it. The night not long enough to acknowledge what it is all about.

In another way, she is glad that Terri is distracted by Justine. Time to recover. She has no intention of sharing these feelings. They are too strange, private. It took courage to mention them to Sister Alberta. Sister had said they were nothing to worry about. They would soon pass. There is no one else to share them with. She will cope with the sly looks, the queries about her eyes in the morning. Dismissed easily enough. There is one advantage of being awake all night, she will have no trouble with bed wetting tonight!

As the early morning light strengthens, Emma tries to look at the waving grass with the same appreciation as yesterday. It doesn't work.

The Mystery:

My tears that night in far off 1953 release many of the pent up feelings of the early months of my life as a religious. Loneliness. Aloneness. Solitariness. I had completed Postulancy, been received officially into the Congregation, was commencing the year of canonical training, a twelve-month period when I would study the rules, regulations of religious life, be familiarized with the history, customs,

I no longer looked to her for advice after this situation. She did me the favor of rejecting herself as mentor, advisor who may have caught me within the confines of her thinking had I continued to seek her advice.

of the Order. The tears brought with them the flow of blood of my periods. For the past months I had been free of the monthly flow of blood, its attendant pains; physical womanhood with all its red-blooded, painful cramping realities. Now I could be a nun, still have this potential for physical sexual relations, motherhood, creative expression. This night much more significant than I knew at the time.

This, she says, is the nature of memories; to arrive piecemeal, to connect up with some image of the present.⁵

The rewriting of the memory, the pieces, enabling me to read me differently.

I realize the power of the body awareness. All else in the day forgotten. Limbs dancing, trembling, shaking. Emotional syncope⁶. Balance precarious. Unable to recognize the knocking. The door not opened. The secret place unexplored. Syncope moment denied. Its urgency, energy, invitation, beckoning in every cell of my body. Fearful. Newly confronting. Waves of color moving from heart to gut to finger tips, to rose lips of the vulva, to loins, legs, longings. Tasting forbidden strawberries. Framed, held in a balcony window.

Discourses of body invisibility,⁷ feeling denial, body as evil, holding me back from interpreting, acknowledging the excitement. Marriage possibilities that would have allowed expression of full bodily entry to this place left behind. Sensual attraction to a woman something not to be tolerated in the celibacy discourses I had taken up.

The woman to whom I turned for advice as caught in them as I was coming to be. Maybe because she was older, even more confined by the rules of expression, by the accepted

mores of what could be verbalized than I would ever be. Not able to read the physical this wonderful trembling femininity, alerting, advising of crossings into skin-touching, warm-hearted intimacy as healthy, to-be-expected: she hid it in the expressionless, not-to-be-spoken. Her conversation brief, low key, dismissive of the difficult. I no longer looked to her for advice after this situation. She did me the favor of rejecting herself as mentor, advisor who may have caught me within the confines of her thinking had I continued to seek her advice. (This insight alone making the memory worth investigating).

Explanation of the tears as jealousy the easiest interpretation, (the one in which I became caught). Another had seemingly taken my place in the esteem, love, attention of my friend. I wanted to be first in the favor of my companion. She and I had experienced our first year of religious life together. I wanted this sense of intimacy, friendship to continue to grow. I would not let her know that she physically attracted me. I was learning that the regulations of religious life did not allow what was called particular friendships. I needed such relationships. They were forbidden me. Contradiction. Tears. Complications.

Tears themselves had not been an important part of my life, (though they became so in the years after this time). I do not remember crying much at all earlier in my life. On this Christmas occasion, the tears becoming gift. A wonderful release of all the sexual, embodied energy that had gathered in the

premenstrual time (vacuum, time, space between girl and woman) of the previous months. The strongest aspects of the memory the relaxedness as the night progressed. The tears an embarrassment, not to be shared publicly. As Bella Akhmadulina's rain:

*...splayed on my shoulders like a monkey
And the town was embarrassed by the
whole thing.⁸*

The tears, the trembling, the visible top of an iceberg/volcano I did not know existed. I feel a great liberation in my spirit as I look at them now. I am, was, more than the jealousy, yet I let it explain. I hid the woman. Let the tears express the body. I had other meanings at my disposal than the fearful, rejected friend. Terri's choices, my friendship with her, not necessarily my only opportunities for agency, choice.

Bella Akhmadulina's "Twelve Lyrics from Rain" capture the young woman in tears again. I envisage myself as this woman haunted by the rain as her constant companion, fearful of its public consequences as well as rejoicing in its uniqueness.

Bella rejecting the rain, asks to be left alone. It will not go away. The rain becoming for her an extended metaphor for her spirit, which cannot be quenched. It goes with her into a house where she knows she will not be welcomed except as a fashionable visitor to entertain. The rain embarrasses. She is invited close to the fire to dry out, imagines that the invitation is to the medieval fire that burns witches. She watches the water dried up by others, to reappear again and

again. She claims ownership of the rain, is told she will have to answer for it. Each one of her situations a way of imaging my frustration, my tears:

*...the Rain licked
my lips, smelling warm as a wet puppy⁹*

I admit the tears as integral to me as Bella's rain to her. One of my ways of expressing sensuality flowing, licking, wetting. I am the jealous novice and the questioning young woman looking for sexual freedom, expression. Neither one excluding the other. I am the sensitive, easily hurt romantic without having to reconcile this position with that of the novice aspiring to holiness. I am more. I see these tears for the first time in my life as of value in my search. Like Bella acknowledging her rain, I let the tears in this memory back into my life, gently accepting them as central to my story:

*Until in a voice made suddenly
hoarse and wretched I shouted
out: "Don't touch. It belongs to
me."¹⁰*

Women of Mercy

I recognize in these moments of discovery further interruptions to my present modes of self identification. The tears are no longer mine only. Once I tell you of them and you allow them into your meaning-making, they become part of your story too. They touch the pain of the world, of other forms of grief and suffering I have not known. They affect the whole of my community.

Unhappiness is having no one to weep with. No one to remember with, no one to tell.¹¹

The tears, though valuable, are still a frustrated expression of the passion and energy of my life. The years of struggle to sublimate, to use the energy of such strong desire for creativity and passionate commitment to my choice of life style are beyond the scope of this paper. I wanted to transcend some of the boundaries that constrain my relational being. Without the permission to acknowledge sexual identity free from taboos and guilt, such sublimation was not possible. I wanted to place the body, the only means I have to incarnate God in my world in starker awareness in the story of the Spirit in my life. I wanted to:

*accept the suffering, to refuse
to pass it on to another, to forgive,
to end the needless torment,
and most of all to transmute evil into energy for
the vitality of the whole¹²*

In the enterprise of feminist, gentle approaches to the whole of creation and the sacredness of the body, the examination of this memory enabled me to see the ethical and moral limits without being fearful of them any longer. The giftedness of creation, of resistance, newness, and life have become mine through the journey. Gently loving all these women that are and have been me, I move into the future.

I acknowledge the problematizing of sexual identity that a vow of celibacy presents. I want to live a celibate existence that allows the passion and compassion that arises out of sexual

being, that is a response to the suffering of the world, to be expressed in ministry, in relationships in community. I want to transcend the genital without losing the sharpness of the awareness. I continue the search. Each small insight a deeper consciousness of God.

I find, someplace deep in my heart acknowledgment of the Spirit that keeps the search going. It is Sophia, wisdom, the feminine manifestation of God as I incarnate her. She was present in these instances in this early memory just as she is present now in the years of what I could call my maturity.

Schussler-Fiorenza says it in another way for me:

Identity, especially Christian identity, is always determined *kyriachally*, and hence it must be repeatedly formulated anew in a permanent process of critical reflection and transformative solidarity.¹³

My questions stem now from the need to relate such changing self identifications to the wider spheres of both church and society in which I live and work and

ing in our own story lines, how do we continue to link in the transformative solidarity that Schussler-Fiorenza refers to in the above quotation? For each of us holds a cultural identity that is unique, precious, and dependent on specific choices and storylines. How do we cross these cultural boundaries without doing violence to the other? How do we let the energy of love into our stories?

How do we develop trust in such a changing, dynamic environment of rich diversity? How do we let former boundaries that constrict go? How do we recognize that there is no arbitrariness in such diversity?¹⁴ It is of the very essence of the universe. How does knowledge of my own embodiedness lead to greater fullness of being? How do we begin to speak a new language as women religious that is not determined by earlier patriarchal representations of meaning but springs from our own experiences as embodied women?

Catherine McAuley walked the streets of Dublin in a time when women were mostly at

seen that part of Dublin. She became a religious to see that the work continued (though that very interpretation of her commitment simplifies and does injustice to her love). Her capacity to go beyond the boundaries seems to me to have sprung from her attention to ministry needs as an expression of her ever deepening Christianity.

Catherine loved the poor. She loved her own nieces and family and the women who chose to work with her. Her loving relationships became the bonding networks that underpinned all her choices. She wrote letters, traveled many miles at a time when travel was exhausting and time consuming to keep the links with her communities. She allowed the spirit of wisdom, mercy, and compassion to move in the emptiness of her deepest being. She incarnated the God of mercy in every aspect of her life.

How does Catherine's story lead me through the challenges I listed above? How would she cross many of the cross-cultural boundaries we are faced with in our efforts to be in mercy together? How would wider world views challenge her thinking to be different? Where would she set limits today that religious life normally set for women of her time? How would she use the disharmonies in our world to bring about social change that shifts power to the poor and the planet?

I believe that the need to articulate our spiritual journey together has never been greater. If we can be courageous enough to face some of the dark moments and shadows in our own personal story and in our communal

If we let memories, relationships, the planet, and the cosmos speak to us further, we may find the interdependency of all creation as one of the starting points for further levels of reflection.

link with others to form community. If each of us is true to the changing choices and need for further modifications of mean-

home and sheltered. She built a house in a fashionable area and offered space to women in need who would normally have not

stories, we may find in them the very capacities, disharmonies and break points we need to move with freedom and compassion into the new millennium with some of Catherine's audacity and love. The reflections can reveal what has been hidden to our normal viewing.

If we let memories, relationships, the planet, and the cosmos speak to us further, we may find the interdependency of all creation as one of the starting points for further levels of reflection. Rosemary Ruether, in speaking of spiritualities for the future, links the search for identity that is the core of this essay with such interdependency. She also emphasizes the human dignity that is the Christian heritage and the heart of my examination of some of the challenges I faced in living my vow of celibacy.

An ecological spirituality needs to be built on three premises: the transience of selves, the living interdependency of all things, and the value of the personal in communion.¹⁵

If we have the courage to face the transience of selves; if we continue searching for new ways to live and express communion/community/intercommunion; if we can risk the changes needed to allow interdependency to be part of our lives; if we can struggle to love; we can be part of the new story.

We have begun the storying as we search together in spaces like the pages of this journal. Its challenges are our new millennium encounters.



Notes

(This essay was originally presented as part of the Conference "Gathering the Threads: Women Scholars of Religion and Theology" held at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, 9–10 January 1998).

1. Friga Hague and Others, *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*, London, Verso, 1992, p 47.
2. "Dangerous Memories" was the title and theme of the Fourth Australian National Feminist Theology Conference at which English writer and theologian Sara Maitland was guest speaker in Canberra, September 1995. She encouraged me to delve into the hidden, unspoken aspects of memory that could be dangerous. One aspect of the danger was the memory's possibility for challenging the established societal ways and encouraging change in order to give women greater acknowledgment of their dignity.
3. The aspect of post-structuralist feminism that is particularly relevant to this essay is that voiced by Patrick Fuery, *Theories of Desire*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1995, 10. "... is the need to analyze analysis, understand understanding, interpret interpretation. And once such a task is undertaken, one of the consequences is a self-reflexivity that must challenge the very discursive practices in operation."
4. Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Mercy Order in Dublin in 1831 could be referenced with many articles from earlier editions of this journal or from the research of Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
5. Gillian Mears, *The Grass Sister*, Knopf Australia, 1995, 258
6. Syncope is here used in the manner Catherine Clement uses as meaning a range of possible meanings, a range that includes—a possible moment of imbalance as in syncopation in music, a stopping as in a laugh, a cough, a sneeze, a faint, a vibration or a point of rapture or ecstasy, a moment of illumination or insight, a choice point that influences the future story, an abrupt suspension in time. Catherine Clement, *Syncope, The Philosophy of Rapture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
7. See Sarah Coakley (ed.) *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
8. Bella Akhmadulina, "Twelve Lyrics from Rain" in Elaine Feinstein (ed.), *Three Russian Poets*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1979, 65
9. Akhmadulina, 65
10. Akhmadulina, 73
11. Helene Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, London, Routledge, 1998, 47.
12. Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, Santa Fe, Bear and Co., 1984, 81.
13. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Theology*, London, SCM Press, 1994, p 57.
14. Diversity and differentiation as used in the writings of Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry as they unfold the possibilities of the impact of the knowledge of the interdependence of all creation.
15. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, San Francisco, Harper, 1994, p 251.



Contributors

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Kathleen P. Rushton, R.S.M., is a member of the Christchurch Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has recently returned to Christchurch after submitting her Ph.D. at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Her thesis, entitled "The Parable of Jn 16:21: A Feminist Socio-Rhetorical Reading of a (Pro)creative Metaphor for the Death Glory of Jesus" was supervised by Prof. Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M.

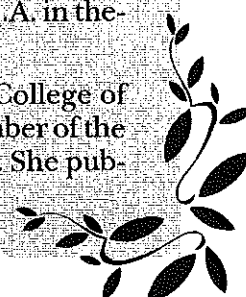
Alice M. Sinnott, R.S.M., (Auckland) is a native of Ireland and is currently lecturing in wisdom literature, biblical creation theology, and biblical themes in contemporary literature at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her 1997 doctoral thesis at Oxford University in England was "The Personification of Wisdom in the Old Testament." Prior to her doctoral work, she taught English literature, French, and German in secondary schools in Auckland for twenty years. She was also lecturer in biblical and catechetical studies at the Auckland College of Education and also trained pastoral ministers.

Paula M. Smith, R.S.M., (Bathurst) is a member of the Leadership Team of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia. She holds a Ph.D. from James Cook University, Townsville in Queensland. Her research has been mainly in the areas of women's biographies through post-structuralist feminism, especially the theory and writings of Helene Cixous. She is an educator who has worked in both secondary and tertiary fields.

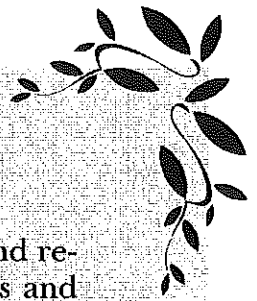
Anne Tormey, R.S.M., (Perth) holds a Ph.D. in Religious Studies and is involved in congregational administration. She is course convenor for the Catherine McAuley Leadership and Service Award for young women (25-40) and is currently involved in the transfer of congregationally owned health and welfare institutions to lay governance. She holds M.A. degrees in both education and philosophy (women's studies) and has been involved in secondary school education, adult education, and congregational leadership.

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Discussion Questions



Cadigan:

How is the dominant culture interpreting religious life within my local and regional community? How is it recognizing or suppressing the uniqueness and worth of persons who represent minority cultures?

Dowling:

What is the effect on readers if they celebrate the importance of Mary Magdalene in John 20, but then see no women represented at gospel's end in John 21?

Fox:

If God the Father is understood also as God, Mother of Mercy, what effect does this have on Marian devotion? On women's self-understanding?

Rushton:

Considering the case of the Samaritan woman, is ethnicity-culture a greater cause of marginalization, or gender, in your experience?

Sinnott:

Many sermons have been preached on Prov 31:10-31, suggesting the passage is a portrait of the ideal female spouse. In your understanding of women and marriage, what in the text should be emphasized and deemphasized today?

Smith:

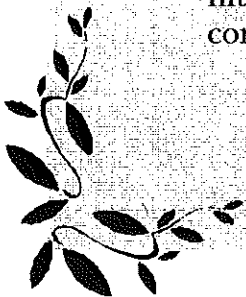
Can you remember a personal experience or identify a communal experience that compels you to "accept the suffering, to refuse to pass it on to another, to forgive, to end the needless torment, and most of all to transmute evil into energy for the vitality of the whole"?

Tormey:

How do you understand the outer work of changing social structures in relation to the inner work of "relinquishment, letting go of projects, roles, and possessions" and facing "the deforested, infertile parts of ourselves, our own inner militia and our own repositories of toxicity"?

Vakata:

"Individuals feel that they have an accepted position in the group...a sense of significance. They feel bonds with one another; this gives them a sense of solidarity. How significance and how solidarity are to be expressed in fact are most often determined by the culture or the belief of the people who make up the community." How is the difference between significance and solidarity resolved in your community culture?



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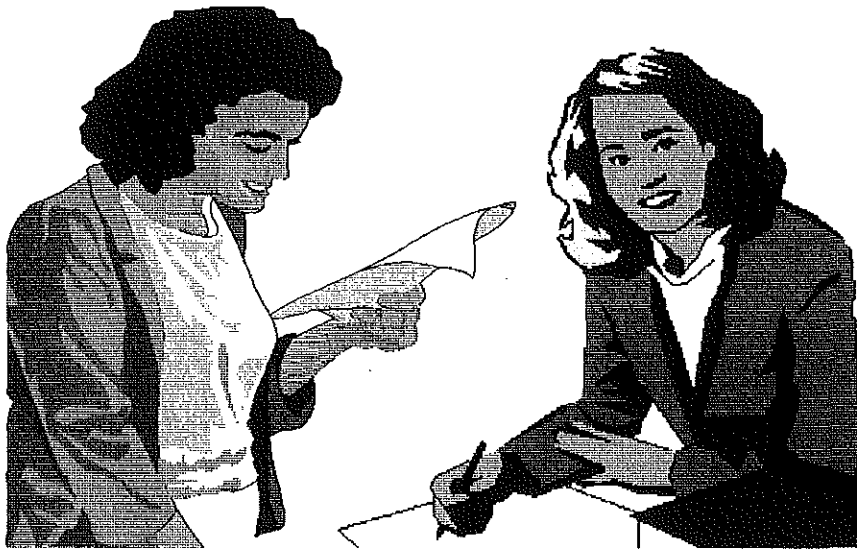
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MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

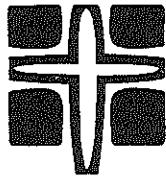
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Julie Upton, R.S.M. currently serves as **MAST**'s executive director. **MAST** will hold its annual meeting in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 3 to 6, 2001, prior to the CTSA, June 7-10, 2001.

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Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity.



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