

The Dew of Mercy or the Blood of Sacrifice: The Choice Facing Human Civilisation

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Epigraph

The patriarchy has no interest in spiritualizing sexed nature. Therefore, patriarchy's relation to matter and its cultural organization is twisted. Hegel, in particular, was aware of this ethical failure in our relation to the natural world and to genders and their genealogies: Antigone is sacrificed because she respects the blood and the gods of her mother and therefore performs the rites over her dead brother. Hegel has written that the whole subsequent development of the spirit was mortgaged against this original sacrifice.¹

Introduction

In recent years, neuro-science has taught us the importance of symbols, rituals and music in regulating human emotions and in forming and shaping human consciousness. Do our symbols, theologies and rituals inspire just relations between families and community? Do they encourage cultures of war or cultures of peace? Do they promote displacing responsibility onto politicians, warriors, priests, or even the Supernatural, or taking responsibility for the awful human condition in which we now found ourselves at global level?

With such questions, the importance of religion has broadened out so that many scholarly disciplines are now concerned with how theologies shape human consciousness with either positive or negative effects.² These approaches have major implications for religious scholarship that can no longer rely on its old traditional methods. In addition, given the gendered violence throughout the world today, the study of gender has become crucial at all levels.

In this context, the invitation to write for this book (to be published on this auspicious anniversary of the *British and Irish School of Feminist Theology*) requested that I update my earlier article presented at BISFT in 1996, “Mercy Not Sacrifice”. It offers the opportunity to trace my journey from theology

¹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) p.194

² See for a summary of such work: Anne Baring, *The Dream of the Cosmos: A Quest for the Soul*. (Dorset, England: Archive Publishing, 2013).

to theology, and especially the journey that brought me to focus on the words of Jesus and the major prophets of all religious traditions who called out in no uncertain terms that they *desired mercy not sacrifice*.³

Irish context

My theological journey began in Ireland, a country torn apart by civil war from 1968 onwards, where over 3,500 people were killed and many thousands more left orphaned, wounded, disabled or traumatised. In the early 1970s, throughout the theological world, the topic, *liberation theology*, was offering hope to formerly colonised populations as they revisited the Christian Gospels developing strategies of liberation for oppressed communities. Following undergraduate training in theology, sociology and social anthropology at the University of Hull, from 1974 to 1979, (women were not admitted not the study of theology in Ireland at that time) I had become editor of *Movement* then an international journal of theology and politics, published by the Student Christian Movement of Britain and Ireland.

With hope and a certain sense of pride I brought some special issues introducing the themes, *Celtic Theology*, *For the Banished Children of Eve: Feminist Theology*, *Theology of Gay Liberation*, and *Liberation Theology* into a radical bookshop in Belfast, Ireland.⁴ The young male shopkeeper gave me very short shrift. Given the havoc of Northern Ireland, *the sooner religion and theology disappeared altogether, the better!* His reaction shook me to the core, and yet, given what was happening all around us, it might have been expected. Although the conflict in Ireland had political roots, religious themes had given momentum to political struggle. The divisions between Republicans and Loyalists coincided with Roman Catholic and Protestant divides, yielding very bitter and toxic fruits.

The language of sacrifice —religious and political, legitimate and illegitimate, superior and inferior, interrupted and failed — permeated political discourse. Irish Republicans (mostly Roman Catholic) appealed to the sacrifices of those who had died in the Irish Easter Rising of 1916. Loyalists (mostly Protestant) who claimed allegiance to the Crown, appealed to the Battle of the Boyne fought by William of Orange in 1690 to legitimate their claims.

The beneficiaries (so to speak) of such sacrifices perpetrated unimaginable horrors in the name of both sacrifice and self-sacrifice — two sides of the same coin. Such language fell on fertile ground since the discourse of sacrifice had permeated both major World Wars and the Irish *Easter Rising* of 1916.

Each side had fertile gendered imagery on which to draw. Republicans fought for *Mother Ireland* while Loyalists claimed allegiance to the *Queen of England*. Despite such apparent devotion, misogyny and gender violence were rampant in all parts of Ireland, and the real needs of flesh and blood women scarcely entered their respective agendas. Reflecting on the Irish experience, it soon became apparent that analyzing the phenomenon of *sacrifice* might offer a key to understanding the lethal connection between war, religion, violence. However, the question of gender had yet to be added to that mix.

³ *Isaiah* 14:5; *Hosea* 14:6-8; *Matthew*, 9:13, 12:1-8

⁴ The introductory booklets were produced as inserts into *Movement Magazine*, Published by the Student Christian Movement of Britain and Ireland, between the years 1974 and 1979.

Gender

Along with editing *Movement Magazine*, I had also become a founder and European coordinator of *The Women's Project of the World Student Christian Federation*. Our project cultivated the development of feminist theologies and championed women's roles in ministry. We were very much in touch with the international community such as the Scandinavian churches where women had been ordained and were now taking positions of responsibility. As an insert to *Movement Magazine* I had edited a satirical pamphlet *Why Men Priests?* in preparation for the Lambeth Synod in 1977 that eventually led to women's ordination in the Anglican tradition. Many Roman Catholic women thought it only a matter of time before the Catholic Church ordained women also.

However, in 1976, perhaps anticipating the monstrous hordes of women (as John Knox had called us), the Vatican (quite independently it must be added) produced a document where it declared (was it infallibly?) that women could never be ordained.⁵ For Roman Catholic women, this document was a major kick in the teeth, not only because it appeared to exclude women from ordination (and eventually the Vatican produced prohibitions on even *discussing* women's ordination), but also because the theological reasoning behind the document amounted to a form of *theological juvenilia*. Its argument were widely discredited, not only by the work of the *Pontifical Biblical Commission* (some of whose members resigned at the uses to which their work had been put), but also by a wide range of other scholars who took the document apart, paragraph by paragraph, for its logical and theological inconsistencies.⁶

Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued at the time that the Vatican was "risking heresy" in its attempts to exclude women from ordination. I realised then that not logic but power was at stake, and that no amount of biblical evidence, historical analysis, or the most brilliant feminist theology, would make a whit of difference.

The language used by the Vatican, and the historical and ongoing exclusion of women in most traditions from becoming active sacrificers (and even their exclusion from precincts where sacrifice was being celebrated – sanctuaries) was a potent clue as to the relationship between gender, sacrifice and violence. The question inevitably arose: was there a connection between these phenomena?

My theological questions and gender critique were basic if not simple: where could we find sources that would enable the development of paradigms of identity that transcended the political and religious divisions between Republicans and Loyalists then wreaking havoc in Ireland? What might be the gendered implications?

The playwright, Frank McGuinness had already attempted what might be termed a *sacrificial reconciliation* with his play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme*. This play implicitly appealed to the joint sacrifices of those — Protestants and Catholics — who had died together in the trenches in the First World War, implying that their common sacrifices there should serve to unite them now. Instinctively I recoiled from such sacrificial imagery — bloodstained altars,

⁵ *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, 1976, ⁶ *Women Priests: Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed. Leonard and Arlene Swidler, (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

devastated battlefield, battered bodies on crucifixes, the skeleton figures of Irish hunger strikers, or insipid images of self-sacrificial women.

Suspicion regarding the gendered underpinnings had already begun to stir when, at some point in the midst of the *Northern Irish conflict*, representatives of the two major traditions met together. Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich was Primate of All Ireland, and the Rev. Ian Paisley, was founder of the Free Presbyterian Church. High hopes were held by all for such an ecumenical gathering. However, it was widely reported at the time that in theological terms they had come to agreement on only one central issue: their mutual disdain for, and prohibitions against homosexuality! In other words, ecumenical agreement could be arrived at only by finding a common enemy — anyone who dared disturb, or challenge, heteronormativity. Pursuing the connections between gender, war, sacrifice and violence now entered the fray.

Could it be the case, therefore, that male separatist blood sacrificial rituals and their warrior counterparts actually *performed* male hegemony? Far from acting as representatives of the Jesus Christ, who embodied *mercy*, could it be that the major churches were effectively acting as the patriarchal gender police of Irish society? Could there possibly be an alternative interpretation of the Christian Gospels to which a self-respecting woman might subscribe?

Brigit

Turning to Celtic sources and, in particular, the publication *Celtic Theology*, had been a very early and enthusiastic attempt to discern whether the Celtic Church might have offered an alternative to what seemed then to have been the imperialist and patriarchal reaches of the Roman Catholic Church. If Saint Patrick was the main representative of patriarchal theology in Ireland, would turning to Saint Brigit offer anything different, especially in relation to gender relations?

Despite the young Belfast man's response, the sources were suggestive and fascinating, and the next opportunity to explore them (alongside the politics of sacrifice) began with doctoral studies in the USA at Boston College, Andover Newton Theological School, and Harvard Divinity School.

In 1980, with no background in Celtic Studies, I belly flopped into a bibliographical essay on Saint Brigit, believing her traditions to offer an alternative to male clericalism. It quickly became obvious that the subject was overwhelming. Following many foreign raids on Ireland's cultural and religious heritage, and extensive Irish missionary activity, hundreds of *Lives of Saint Brigit* had been liberally deposited in libraries throughout Europe and beyond. Studying them would be a lifetime's work, the province of linguistic and manuscript experts.

However, throughout Europe the traditions of Brigit had also fallen on very fertile ground as the figure of *Saint Brigit* (possibly with the aid of enterprising and enthusiastic Irish monks and nuns) attracted to herself what would now be recognised and described as the traditions of Old European divinities. In the event (although I then abandoned any attempt to write a doctoral thesis on Brigit) my earliest forays into her manifestations as goddess and saint were published in 1989 in *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*.⁶

⁶ *Mary Condren*, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989; Dublin: New Island Books, 2002).

Thereafter, I put aside my work on *Brigit* to return specifically to the connections between religion, gender and sacrifice, the eventual subject of my doctoral thesis of 1994 at Harvard Divinity School: *The Role of Sacrifice in the Creation of a Gendered Social Order and Gendered System of Representation*.⁷ By now, finding an alternative to *sacrificial* interpretations of Christianity was becoming crucial.

Celtic Way of Knowing: Mercy not Sacrifice

I returned to Ireland in 1986 (before completing my doctorate) to attempt to make a theological contribution to the continuing horrors we knew in Ireland. Between 1989 and 1992 I worked at Mount Oliver Institute, a then radical adult education centre for nuns, priests and lay persons on sabbatical, many from their missionary activities throughout the world. Appointed to teach *gender studies*, I struggled to make connections between their experiences and feminist theories and theologies. My eventual strategy (which proved very fruitful) was in getting students to explore the connections between colonisation in Ireland, so-called developing countries, and the strategies of colonisation in relationships between women and men.

Around this time I was invited to present my work at a meeting of the Northern Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. The sisters listened carefully to my work on colonisation, but then their congregational leader, Sr. Agnes Hannon, stood up and asked a pertinent question: *what does this have to do with mercy?*

Lightbulbs went off in my head as I suddenly began to see the connections between colonisation, gender, sacrifice, and Celtic theologies. Claims to superior sacrifices, theologies of sacrifice, and persecution for failure to sacrifice to emperors, queens, or kings had played a major role in European colonising invasions throughout the world, and especially in Ireland. Just as the early Christians had been martyred for refusing to participate in sacrifices to the Roman Emperor, so too, Irish Catholics were condemned to death if they celebrated Mass (priests) or attended such celebrations as participants. Anyone wishing to practice their Catholic faith had to do surreptitiously, behind large hedges, up lonely mountains, or within thick forests where they would not be discovered. In other words, sacrifice had played a major role in legitimating colonisation.

The careful listening of the Sisters of Mercy, in the words of Nelle Morton, had literally *heard me into speech*.⁸ It became evident that a focus on *sacrifice* had to be complemented by one on *mercy*. A new phase of the journey had begun.

BISFT 1996

The BISFT Summer School, held in Ireland in 1996 kindly invited me to present a paper integrating *Celtic and Feminist Theology*. Taking *mercy* as my theme, the explorations into *Celtic Theology* began anew. Quickly, however, the seams began to fall apart again as it became obvious that the *Celtic* traditions (especially in relation to women) were highly ambivalent and could not be taken as charter texts espousing a theology of mercy (let alone be an uncritical source for *feminism*). In some Celtic

⁷ This work is briefly summarised in my article, "Sacrifice and Political Legitimation: The Production of a Gendered Social Order", *Journal of Women's History*, Winter/Spring, 1995, vol. 6, no. 4; vol. 7 no.1 pp.160–89.

⁸ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) p.82).

texts (as in mainstream theologies, and much like the traditional work of women – often invited only to clean up) *mercy* was only invoked when *sacrifice* had done its worst. Nevertheless, through that article, the seeds had been sown, and the focus on *mercy* became a welcome relief to my work on sacrifice.⁹

In 2007 Professors Lisa Isherwood and Kath McPhillips again invited me to expand my work on mercy in the form of an article *Melting Hearts of Stone* that interrogated the distinction between *mercy* and *sacrifice*.¹⁰ While I stand over my treatment of *mercy*, in retrospect, I now understand that my use of the word *sacrifice* was too all-encompassing and did not do justice to its many layers of meaning.

For the next several years I continued to teach and struggle with the interrelated issues of sacrifice, gender, violence, mercy — complex projects, each of which hopes to see the light of day in the coming years. In the meantime, given the exclusion of women from officiating at religious celebrations, the challenge became that developing an inclusive ecumenical paradigm where women from many traditions, Protestant, Catholic, pagan, non-aligned could comfortably begin to explore approaches to spirituality and ritual, without having to buy into the sacrificial divides of traditional religions. The obvious solution was to turn again to the multivalent figure of Brigit – goddess, saint, and folklore figure.

Festivals of Brigit

The first attempt at a *Brigit Festival* was at Mount Oliver Institute in 1990, following which I was reported to the Vatican by a female participant for singing *pagan songs* (whatever they were!). Nevertheless, following the closure of Mount Oliver, in the early 1990s a group of us set up *The Institute for Feminism and Religion* (now called *Woman Spirit Ireland*) an independent educational company that since then has offered lecture and speaker series, rituals, festivals, retreats and conferences.

Over the years we have asked these questions: In what ways does our approach to religion and theology need to change to foster *mercy not sacrifice*? What kind of stories and resources would cultivate that enterprise? Can we now take those intellectual, academic, personal and professional risks that will enable us to make the significant cultural interventions necessary? Can we find ways to recuperate the indigenous wisdom traditions, the taproots of our cultures, and generate hope? And, in particular, since women are not permitted to officiate at ceremonies in the Roman Catholic Church (to which most of participants then adhered), let alone even be consulted at major theological gatherings that formed theologies and ethics for millions around the world, could we find wisdom traditions on which we could draw to critique our present state of affairs and to offer the hope of other possibilities?

The festival of Brigit, traditionally celebrated on February 1st, *Imbolc*, had almost died out, except in very remote areas through Ireland. Just as I had once *bellyflopped* into Celtic texts, *Brigit Festivals* now offered a similar opportunity or challenge. At one of our first celebrations the five organisers

⁹ “Mercy Not Sacrifice: Toward a Celtic Theology”, *Feminist Theology* No. 15, May 1997, pp.31-54.

¹⁰ Mary Condren, “Melting Hearts of Stone: Mercy not Sacrifice”, (2008) in Lisa Isherwood and Kathleen McPhillips (eds) *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Appraisal* Ashgate Press, pp. 147-166.

literally held hands with the rest of the group and waited for the creativity to emerge. At one gathering a facilitator turned to me saying *I really would love to do whatever it is you want me to do, if only I knew what it was!* — to which I could only laugh, and reply, *let's see what happens.*

Of course, we had brought songs, dances, *Lives of Saint Brigit*, and artefacts associated with Brigit such as her cross, *crios* (belt), and cloak. For everything else we relied on the wisdom of the group to *excavate, liberate, meditate on* the traditions of Brigit, goddess, saint, midwife, outlaw, prophet, metaphor of Spring — along with many other epithets we gave to the titles of our festivals over the years.

Participants came from all traditions and none — the disenfranchised, the disinherited, and the disinclined — all embarking on a pilgrimage, rather than a quest for absolute truth. Our aim was always to continue to enable women to *hear each other into speech* rather than to promote or combat any particular religious tradition. We offered opportunities and resources to women (and the few men who sometimes came along and were welcomed), to reclaim authentic spiritualities and to develop ritual offerings in their own communities and families.

However, one thing immediately became clear: we could not rely solely on Saint Brigit's *official* written texts, or dogmatic theological assertions. Rather we quickly became aware of the subterranean practices that still existed in Ireland in the form of rituals, symbols, pilgrimages, devotions carried out by local populations in places that (for centuries) had held such communities together under the matronage of local saints, (probably previously considered to be divinities). Once we began to scratch the oral traditions, we soon found that we had a rich treasury of songs, poetry, and sites now associated with Saint Brigit. Our events effectively evoked both conscious and what might now be called *cellular memories* — a form of authentication parallel to the manuscript sources.

Our *Brigit Festivals* continued for many years in Termonfeckin, County Louth; Athenry, County Galway; Belfast, County Down, and in Dublin. Today, many former participants continue to organise private and public celebrations in their own homes and local areas. However, another significant shift was to take place when in 2008, *The Circle*, a then independent group attached to Brescia University College at the University of Western Ontario, invited me to bring our Brigit Festival to Canada.

Resourcing such festivals at Brescia, and the challenge for over eight years to contribute new material, represented an extraordinary and creative opportunity to develop the theology of Brigit. Participants had originally come from, or worked in, many diverse European and international communities. These participants often gasped as they recognised (from their far distant European or other heritages) common artefacts used in our festivals: the *crios* (kriss), or belt; the *brat* or cloak, and the cross. Through such recognition, and their cellular attunement to the rituals, it became apparent that *Brigit* was not only an Irish saint, now confined to February 1st, the festival of *Imbolc*. Rather, *the figure of Brigit* had inherited (and/or spread) rich traditions from all over Europe and beyond.

Similar to those in Ireland, the Canadian and USA participants came from many religious traditions, and none. Yet, perhaps the most extraordinary feature of our *Brigit Festivals* has been the ability of the metaphor of Brigit's cloak to *contain* the kinds of theological and other divisions that might otherwise arise in such gatherings.

Throughout our events, we use the chant *Fé Bhrat Bhríde Sin* (May Brigit's mantle protect us) a chant that weaves us seamlessly from one part of our celebrations to the next. The cloak provides a nonverbal metaphor for the whole group that offers containment and safety. Whereas the altar of sacrifice serves to divide — men from women, saved from damned, sacred and profane; God and the world; clergy and lay; pure and impure; Protestant from Catholic; righteous and sinners; male and female — Brigit's cloak *contains complexity*. The cloak simply transcends such divides and welcomes (it could be said as Jesus did) the excluded, sinners, and even women exuding bodily fluids! The cloak, therefore, is an inherently ecumenical symbol with ancient and maternal roots. In other words, we had begun to reclaim an ancient religious metaphor and artefact that did not depend for its authenticity on blood sacrifice.

Containment and Cloak of Mercy

Over the years it became apparent that the cloak could be a primary symbol for what we might call a *matrixial* approach to theology. Professor Lisa Isherwood, once again played some part in *hearing me into speech*, this time through the work of Polish/Israeli artist, psychoanalyst, and feminist theorist, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.

In 2009 I had the opportunity to begin to present Ettinger's work in the context of developing a *relational theology*. In contrast to the phallic assumptions of major philosophers and psychoanalysts, Ettinger stresses our matrixial interconnectedness, and our relationality, as opposed to the theological (and psychoanalytical) imperative of achieving acute sacrificial separations.¹¹ Ettinger's work is complex but she briefly addressed the question of mercy when she revisited some Hebrew phrases in precisely those terms:

In the Hebrew Bible one of the many names for God is El Harahmim, translated as 'God full of Mercy' or compassion, and also as misereri, misericordiam, caritas, pietas, gratia and so forth. These are indeed the figurative means of Rahamim. But the literal meaning, the signifier is: wombs, uterus, Matrixes. The text literally signifies a 'God full of wombs' or (in Latin) full of 'matrixes'.¹³

What does the cloak have to do with wombs? What do wombs have to do with mercy? What might all of this have to do with Brigit? These questions initiated yet another phase of the journey, this time to an even more ancient figure, that of the *Cailleach*, whose multi-valent traditions were eventually inherited by the Christian figure of Saint Brigit.

The most ancient name for the *Cailleach* was *Sentainne*, or Old Woman. However, that name was superseded by the simple word *Cailleach*, variously translated as the *Veiled One*, *Hooded One*.¹²

¹¹ Mary Condren, "Relational Theology in the Work of Artist, Psychoanalyst and Theorist, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, in *Through Us, With Us, In Us: Relational Theologies in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Bellchambers, (SCM Press, London, 2010), 230-263. ¹³ Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'Transgressing with-in-to the Feminine' (1997). Reprinted in: Penny Florence & Nicola Foster (eds.), *Differential Aesthetics*, (London: Ashgate, 2000): 183-210: p.75.

¹² Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003).

Exploring the traditions of the *Cailleach*, the many other *Cailleacha* throughout Ireland, and her widespread international counterparts, it soon became evident that through our *cellular memories* we had also begun to tap into a rich lodestone of Old European traditions in which the metaphor of the cloak played a major role. It is important to state also that access to this lodestone came primarily, not through written classical texts, but through bodily immersion in what remained of the ritual and symbolic traditions associated with the *Cailleach* and Brigit.

The metaphor of the cloak connects Brigit and the *Cailleach* across the centuries, and using the cloak in our rituals, we were to find another potent symbol of mercy, a non-violent alternative to the blood of sacrifice.¹³

Dew of Mercy

The *Festival of Imbolc* occurs on February 1st. On the eve of *Imbolc*, traditionally people put out pieces of precious cloth (symbolising her cloak) to be impregnated with the dew of the earth as Brigit's spirit passes over. The following morning, people take the dew soaked cloak back in, cut it into small strips, and use it to heal ailments of body and spirit. At one of our festivals, for instance, a woman told how her grandmother used the *brat* (the cloak) to wrap sick birds that she then placed in the ample folds of her breast for warmth. Her *chirping granny* came alive again through her memories.

However, the image of the dew-soaked cloak is not confined to *Imbolc* or February 1st. On the contrary, the practice of putting out the cloak to absorb the rich dew appears throughout the festivals that traditionally mark the four quarterly seasons: *Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine*, and *Lughnasadh*, when the *Cailleach* is said to shake her cloak and change the seasons.

Across the world, dew has been recognised as a holy fluid in various religious traditions. In Scotland, the druids considered dew to be the most precious of all forms of water and in the Scottish Insular Festivals, similar practices to those in Ireland were pervasive.¹⁴ In Ukraine, the goddess Berehinya is considered to be the "hostess who brings mists and covers the corn with dew."¹⁷ In Bulgaria, the "the *rusalki* or *vily* come into the fields out of the forest and pour out the fertilizing dew from their hunting horns."¹⁸

In Germanic cultures, the Norns, (Fate, Being, and Necessity) *watered the tree each day with pure water and whitened it with clay from the spring, and in this way preserved its life, while the water fell down to earth as dew.*¹⁵ "According to the *Helgakvía Hjórvabssonar* their horses shake, and from their manes the dew falls into the valleys, and hail, fertilising the fields."²⁰ In the Hindu spring

¹³ These connections will be explored in my forthcoming book to be published by New Island Books, Dublin in 2016. (Title to be determined).

¹⁴ Marian MacNeill, *Silver Bough: vol. 1 Scottish Folk-lore and folk-belief* Introduced by Stewart Sanderson, (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1989). p.72. ¹⁷ Mary B. Kelly, *Goddess.Women.Cloth* (NY: Studio Books, 2011), p. 44. ¹⁸ Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 34.

¹⁵ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *God and Myths of Northern Europe* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 26

²⁰ Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "The Valkyries," *The Modern Language Review* vol.21, no.1 (Jan. 1926), pp.55-73, p. 64.

rites, the Goddess Saraswathi is said to be clothed with a garland as white as dew drops, sitting on a lotus, while the gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, pay tribute to her.

Hebrew Bible

Images of the healing power of dew are also found in the Hebrew Bible. When the Israelites were under threat, Gideon asked Yahweh for a sign: *look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.*" Early the next morning he wrung the fleece and obtained a bowlful of water, but he insisted on another proof: *Let me make one more test with the fleece. Let the fleece alone be dry, but let there be dew on all the ground. That night God did so; the fleece alone was dry, but there was dew on all the ground.*¹⁶

If the cloak symbolises the *Creative Womb of the Earth*, the dew signifies the regenerative fluids of the womb, the *dew of mercy*. In Asian traditions this relationship becomes explicit. The Chinese figure of Kwan Yin is a special protector of women and children whose name means "she who hears the weeping world". Kwan Yin is often pictured pouring the dew of compassion or mercy onto her special devotees.²²

The cloak, therefore, represents a metaphor, an alternative to the *redemptive violence* of sacrifice: the *redemptive love* of mercy. It could be argued that developing, understanding and elaborating the theology of the cloak might now provide a potent metaphor challenging the all-pervasive altars of sacrifice. Could the image of the cloak be the key to understanding the injunction of the prophet's desire for *mercy not sacrifice*?

Theology of Mercy

My journey from sacrifice to mercy has taken me from *theology* to *thealogy*. The shift is not simply one from male to female divinities, but involves a radical shift in method, the full consequences of which are beyond this present article. In brief, here are some immediate implications.

Focussing on *mercy* requires a level of complexity, specifically, one that includes interrogating bodily practices, symbols, rituals, artefacts, artworks, and poetry rather than relying uncritically on petrified documents interpreted by petrified scholars who assume that the *Mysterious One* can no longer speak to us today. In reality, *thealogy* has more questions than precipitous answers, such as the following.

Interrogating symbols

What kind of practices and symbols cultivate mercy and containment, and which ones cultivate sacrifice and splitting?

The metaphors of mercy and the cloak honour our human origins from the wombs of mothers. In some indigenous traditions when communities wish to put manners on pompous autocrats, they cry out *a mother bore each one of you*. Such cries reflect philosophies that are, at once, both particular

¹⁶ Judges 6:37, and v.40. See also *Deut.33:13, 33:28; Zechariah, 8:12; Book of Job 29:19.*

²² Mary B. Kelly, *Goddess.Women.Cloth* (NY: Studio Books, 2011), p. 58.

and universal. (We all share human origins from mothers; we will all return to our common mother, the earth).

In contrast, blood sacrificial rituals often *create new origins*, born in blood, often shed in horrific circumstances. Nations are *born* from bloody conflicts, often fought in the names of mythical mothers: *Brittanica*, *Mother Ireland*, and their international counterparts — new forms of periodisation — *pre-war*, or *post-war*. As Luce Irigaray argues:

"Hegel says wars are necessary. They cut off heads and regimes just as one cuts the corn. Later, the harvests grow again, Hegel writes. Wars are one of the serious parts of life, and make us all hold our tongues. Hegel talks about war the way some people talk about nature. He makes it into a person and lends it a power that goes beyond all reason, whether magic or divine.

Nature had its gods and they were sexualized. Who are the gods of History? What is this historical destiny Hegel talks about? Does it run parallel with the anatomic destiny attributed to women?¹⁷

Which metaphor would best serve us, the dew-soaked cloaks of mercy, or the blood stained altars of sacrifice? Which metaphor best represents the primary symbol of redemption or regeneration?

Self-fragilization or Identity

The symbolic cloak serves as an expansive metaphor that *contains communities* in recognising our common human origins. In biblical instances where Jesus or the prophets invoke *mercy* they are actively deconstruct scapegoating, calling for those *who are without sin, to cast the first stone*. *Mercy*, in other words, is a *psychic mode of being*, a discipline that cultivates *containment* rather than *splitting*.²⁴

Spiritual leaders will be those who seek to guide their communities and whose authority does not derive from weaponry but from the capacity for what Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger calls *selffragilization*, those artistic, spiritual, and ethical practices that foster resistance to those ideologies and personal practices that generate violent social relations.¹⁸

Rather than relying solely on dogmatic written texts, seeking inspiration or guidance, they go back to their origins in order to heal and revitalise sick individuals and their communities. They go in a spirit

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) p.143. ²⁴ "In its singular form the noun *rehem* means "womb" or "uterus". In the plural *rabimim*,, this concrete meaning expands to the abstractions of compassion, mercy, and love...Accordingly, our metaphor lies in the semantic movement from a physical organ of the female body to a psychic mode of being. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (CA: ON; Fortress Press, 1986) chap 3, n. 30, 33.

¹⁸ B. L. Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance". In: *Bracha L. Ettinger: Fragilization and Resistance*. Edited by Tero Nauha and Akseli Virtanen. Finnish Academy of Fine Arts with Aivojen yhteistyö, Helsinki, 2009. Also in *Studies in the Maternal* 1 (2) 2009, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk. ²⁶ Zarana Papić, "Feminist Politics in Serbia" in *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across the War Zones* eds. Wenona Giles, Malathia de Alwis, Edith Klein, Neluka Silva, (Canada: Toronto, 2003), p.46.

of gratitude for past gifts received, and a stance of humility where they seek the wisdom they need to guide their communities toward holistic relationship with their own bodies, their families, communities, and the community of earth. Their authority is essentially the witness of their own lives; their inner fires, rather than the outward fires of sacrifice, validate their credibility.

In contrast, contemporary sacrificial discourses depend on a constant stream of scapegoats, or *Others*, enemies or infidels who must be defeated or eradicated. Nowhere was this better expressed than in the recent wars of the former Yugoslavia. As one theorist wrote: *Since 1987, Serbs have not known exactly who they are, but they have been absolutely prepared to discover themselves through a hatred of the "other".*²⁶

The paraphernalia of blood sacrifice often cultivates superior identities, (*whose sacrifice was bigger, better, more worthy, or superseded previous ones*). In contemporary warfare (so-called legitimate or terrorist), the discourses of sacrifice are rampant, justifying horrific atrocities. However, as Friedrich Nietzsche argued long ago:

But blood is the worst witness of truth; blood poisons and transforms the purest teaching to delusion and hatred of the heart. And if someone goes through fire for his teaching—what does that prove? Truly, it is more when one's own teaching comes out of one's own burning!¹⁹

While there are many sterling exceptions, the practitioners of blood sacrifice priests are those whose authority derives from the authority of office, rigid interpretations of written texts, inherited status, and spectacular garments. Their ongoing authority to celebrate *sacrifice* depends on their adhering faithfully to such trappings of office and never challenging the carefully protected relationship between priesthood and perfect representations of heterosexual masculinity.

Religions who cultivate such sacrificial and splitting discourses are effectively complicit in perpetrating toxic narratives to be drawn on *ad nauseum* as circumstances dictate. Especially when religious group dynamics run riot, religious discourse and symbolism actively cultivate what psychoanalysts call the *paranoid schizoid position*. One's identity, individual or group, is achieved at another's expense.²⁸

In reality, Western political and religious discourse has never gone beyond the *paranoid/schizoid position*, and never will as long as our dominant political narratives and symbolisms endorse the cry of the patriarchal representation of Athena who claimed that *no mother gave me birth*. As she sent the old female gods down to earth, she called out as follows:

*Let our wars / Rage on abroad, with all their force, / to satisfy / Our powerful lust for fame. / But as for the bird that fights at home □ my curse on civil war*²⁹ And she continues: *Give joy in return for joy, / One common will for love, / And hate with one strong heart: / Such union heals a thousand ills of man.*³⁰

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist* translated by R. J. Hollingdale as *The Anti-Christ* (1895: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.171.

Conclusions

In early Ireland, the cloak was revered and had even served to legitimise kings, but the cloak was eventually replaced by ordeals of fire and sacrifice, issues that would take us too far afield here. In effect, the cloak was eventually satirised and denigrated in Irish culture.³¹

The most recent wave of the *Irish conflict* began in 1968 following attacks on the Civil Rights Movement of Northern Ireland. Those involved in conflict transformation and community reconciliation learned, through patience, skill, and many long hours of negotiation that a *War on Terror* could never be won, especially when cultural discourse interpreted every death of active participants as a *sacrifice*, a form of fertility that called out for a perpetual cycle of revenge, commemoration, and retribution. Peacebuilding could only begin when such violence was *contained*, rather than fuelled by draconian measures.

After over 3,500 violent deaths and many hundreds of thousands left orphaned, or maimed for life, Irish community and political leaders had embarked on a very sharp learning curve in relation to dealing with so-called *terrorists* and *terrorism* perpetrated by all sides of the conflict. However, despite the involvement of Irish, British and American politicians and some religious leaders in the

²⁸ Cf. Mary Condren, "War, Religion, Gender and Psyche: An Irish Perspective," (2006) in *Holy War and Gender: 'Gotteskrieg' und Geschlecht* eds. Christina von Braun, Ulrike Brunotte, Gabriele Dietze, Daniela Hrzan, Gabriele Jähnert, Dagmar Pruin, Centre for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, New Brunswick, NJ, London: Transaction Publishers, pp. 143-177; Mary Condren. "Gender, Religion, and War," in *Religion and the Politics of Peace and Conflict* eds. Linda Hogan and Dylan Lee Lehrke, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (OR: Eugene: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock, 2009), pp. 125-158.

²⁹ *Aeschylus: the Oresteia, lines, 867-875* p.296 ³⁰ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia* trans. Robert Fagles, (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), lines 872-875, 993-996, pp. 296, 303. ³¹ Michael J. Enright, Prophecy and Kingship in Adomnán's 'Life of Saint Columba,' (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), p. 110; E. M. Greenwood, "Manchín's Cowl in 'Aislinge Meic: Con Glinne,'" *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1992): 36-40 *Peace Process*, Little appears to have been learned regarding ways to address the current *War on Terror*.

Despite the horrors that we experienced in the 20th century, (and already in the 21st century) the major religions (with few exceptions) have made very little effort to critique the theologies and ideologies of sacrifice. Could it be that this is because of their unconscious investment in continuing in act as the gender police throughout the world, even long after their role is now superseded (especially in the West) by new strategies for male hegemony — the hyper-sexualisation and hyperviolence of social media, (not amenable to analysis in this article).

Could it be that they are also unconsciously invested in other forms of fertility, religious, economic and political, increasing their followers, lands, and spheres of influence, impervious to the implications for our Mother the Earth?

What would happen if the major religions focussed not on the superior powers or importance of their respective identities based on their founding sacrifices, but on the development of matrixial approaches to theology? What might happen if such leaders switched their concerns from controlling the fertility of women, to cultivating their communities' ability to love?

Perhaps Martin Luther King summarised the challenges facing all the major religions at this precarious time in human history:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction....The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation. ²⁰

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²⁰ Martin Luther King Jn. *Strength to Love*, 1963.

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