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Fluid Matters

Gendering Holy Blood and Holy Milk

Willy Jansen and Grietje Dresen

Bodily substances figure prominently in Christian and Islamic beliefs and practices. At the intersection of the physical or material and the symbolic, they provide an interesting starting point for a discussion of the material dimension of religion.¹ In this chapter, the bodily fluids blood and milk will be singled out for closer scrutiny. Christians see in the blood of Jesus Christ a source of redemption. He is seen as having sacrificed his blood for the salvation of humankind, and American fundamentalist Baptists, for example, narrate their conversion in terms of being “washed in the blood of Christ.”² Catholic believers symbolically drink the blood of Christ during mass; venerate relics of the Precious Blood in places like Saintes, Bruges, Mantua, or Boxmeer; organize themselves in devotional societies such as the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, and celebrate commemorative feasts of the Precious Blood on the first Sunday of July.³ The sacrifice of blood for atonement, for forgiveness for one’s sins and reconciliation with God, is an equally important symbolic complex in Islam. By following the Qur’anic example of Ibrahim, who showed his surrender to God by his willingness to offer his son but was allowed by God instead to make a “noble sacrifice,”⁴ Muslims ritually slaughter an animal during the Feast of Immolation so that the blood can run free in an offering to God. Shi’ite Muslims participating in the Ashura ritual in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries scourge their backs in submission to God until they bleed, while others touch this sacrificial blood and smear it on themselves or their infants in order to partake in its blessing.⁵

Whereas the religious connotations of blood abound, at first sight those of mother’s milk seem less plentiful. In Christianity, holy milk is especially associated with the Virgin Mary nursing her child. The image of Maria Lactans, probably modeled after the goddess Isis suckling the

infant Horus and showing parallels with other lactating goddesses, such as Yashodā and Hariti, was popular in early Christianity and in the late Middle Ages, as can be seen in several beautiful artworks in which Mary feeds her child or shares her milk with saints. As in the case of the Precious Blood, relics of Holy Milk have attracted pilgrims and been venerated at many sites, including Bethlehem, Walsingham, Chartres, Laon, Genoa, Rome, Venice, Padua, Avignon, Aix-en-Provence, Toulon, Paris, and Naples.⁶ In Islam, animal milk is considered a gift from God. Officially, Islam has no female deities whose holy milk is especially blessed, yet in everyday lived religion, Mary is considered a prominent feminine model, leading Muslim and Christian women to engage in similar devotional practices.⁷ Suckling is discussed extensively in religious sources, as we will show below. This raises the question of how and why bodily fluids of blood and milk figure so prominently in Christianity and Islam. Why do bodily fluids matter in religion? What makes them susceptible to religious meaning?

The important role of the material body and bodily fluids in religious thought, and the mutual impact and, at times, conflation of substance and symbol deserve attention in our efforts to understand the materiality of religion. Bodily metaphors in religion provide models for, as well as models of, experience.⁸ Bryan Turner has noted that “we use the body as a convenient way for talking or thinking about the moral and political problems of society. Our sense of good and evil has also drawn heavily on bodily metaphors.”⁹ Strangely, in his article Turner disregards Mary Douglas, who sees the body as a natural symbol for the social order.¹⁰ It is also interesting to examine possible parallels between the discussion of bodily substances in kinship studies and their symbolic use in religion. Before elaborating on the substantive discourse on blood and milk in Catholicism and Islam, we will review these theories to explore how they can help us understand why bodily fluids matter, and what makes them useful concepts to think with in religion.

Human bodies are usually male or female, and bodily metaphors build structures of masculinity and femininity upon the body. Whereas blood seems gender neutral, milk is feminine. Bodily metaphors can function as gender scripts that express as well as prescribe people’s experience and behavior as gendered beings.¹¹ So, how do specific metaphors of blood and milk and their uses in religion construct men and women as religious beings? We will argue that the religious meanings given to these substances contribute to constructing men and women as different and hierarchically placed religious and social subjects. On a more material level, these fluids operate to limit women’s religious space in comparison with that of men. An analysis of holy texts and visual arts in Christianity and Islam that refer to bodily fluids, as well as actual religious beliefs and practices, as observed in Europe by Grietje Dresen and in Algeria and Jordan by Willy Jansen, can offer insight into the system of meanings embodied in these symbols and their implicit gender messages.

The Substance of Religion

In her study of kinship, Janet Carsten has shown that anthropologists have regarded substance in different ways.¹² The concept can denote a separate thing (such as the blood of a woman), a vital part or essence of that thing (as when the woman points at her daughter and says, "That's my blood"), or the fluid of which her body is composed (as when she uses the same expression to discuss the medical aspects of this matter). This interest in substance evolved from anthropological research into the cultural perceptions of the properties of blood, milk, saliva, and sexual fluids, in an effort to determine how their mutability and transformative potential contributes to constructing kinship.¹³ By the transmission of bodily substances—semen during intercourse and conception, blood and milk during a child's growth—both a new child and its kinship relations are created. In the process, one substance is transformed into another, as the mother's milk that feeds the baby is transformed into its blood and bones. Gendered substances—semen, milk—thus are changed into gender-neutral substances, and vice versa. David Schneider, perhaps the first anthropologist to use substance as an analytical term, points out that family members are related by the fact that "they share in some degree the stuff of a particular heredity. Each has a portion of the natural, genetic substance."¹⁴ He distinguishes this "natural substance" from "blood," which he terms a "symbolic substance." In Schneider's eyes, it is important to differentiate between the symbol and what is allegedly symbolized. Carsten criticizes him for maintaining this dichotomy too strictly. These insights from kinship studies are relevant to a discussion of the role of substances in religious studies because they point to lines of thought that can help us understand why and how substances matter. First, we can say that substances matter in creating relatedness, and second, we can affirm that any analytical distinction between the symbolic and the material should take into account their conflation in actuality.

In religion, too, relatedness is created by the transmission of substances. By sharing ritual food during the Feast of Immolation, Muslims connect with each other and with Allah. Catholics eat bread and drink wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist, during which, according to the Catholic doctrine of "the mystery of transubstantiation" and the "real presence of Christ," these foods are transformed into Christ's body and blood. The worshippers who consume these substances believe that they ingest the Word incarnate and obey the scriptural injunction to "bear God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). In this ritual, we see the transformation from material to symbolic substance and vice versa, and with the movement of the substance between the priest and the believers, a relation is established between Christ and humans, who now share in his holiness and embody his sacrifice. By sharing the same religiously imbued material substance, religious kinship and community are created. The fluid matters now really matter, not merely as a symbolic act of transmission but as an embodiment of the spiritual. This ritual transmission and

transformation of substance fortifies the individual believer bodily, creates spiritual bonds of relatedness between believers and the supernatural and a sense of community among them, and materializes the spiritual connection, thus conflating the symbolic and the material.

“Matter out of place” That Really Matters

Certain bodily substances are central in the ideological order of relatedness, but the dominant substance may change over time and place. In perceptions of kinship, blood is still a dominant concept for expressing relatedness, but recently it is coming to be replaced by the notion of genes. In both Catholicism and Islam, a strong blood discourse still exists, but a discourse of milk has decreased in importance, as we will see. Among bodily substances, fluids especially seem to matter. In particular, all substances related to sexuality—such as semen, vaginal secretions, (menstrual) blood, or human milk—are prone to playing a metaphorical role. In order to understand why and how human “wetware” provides such apt and readily available material for making moral judgments, expressing and imposing social hierarchies, and expressing religious values, we need to look more closely at Mary Douglas’s theory of “matter out of place.”¹⁵

Douglas points to the important symbolic function of bodily substances that are no longer contained within the body. She terms them “matter out of place” because they are physically outside the body and argues that they serve a crucial role by functioning as metaphors for things that are outside the social order. In many cultures, matter out of place is ambiguous and taboo; it can lead to ritual impurity and danger but also to its opposite. She puzzles over the fact that abject substances like pus or blood outside the body are sometimes seen not as defilement, as an impurity opposite to holiness, but as part of holiness: for instance, one of the markers of St. Catherine’s holiness is that she deliberately drank a bowl of pus to punish herself for the revulsion she felt at the wounds she was tending. Bodily matter out of place can thus be seen as sacred or polluting, pure or impure, powerful or dangerous.¹⁶ Its classification is not fixed and may change with how fluids have left the body, or whose body they come from. Given the potency of bodily fluids in evoking a sense of ambiguity and taboo, it is interesting to see what effect they can have on gender.

Holy Blood, Polluting Blood

Blood is frequently used as a metaphor in social life. Close ties and similar identities (or the lack thereof) may be expressed as: “She is of my blood”; “They have blue blood”; or “This is a bloodless relation.” In different areas or religions it can have different meanings.

Whereas in Western Europe the heart is seen as the center of life in the body and the seat of feelings, elsewhere this role can be played by the liver or the intestines. Instead of speaking of a “bleeding” or “broken heart,” an Arab might say that his liver hurts, and in the biblical book of Jeremiah the intestines are allotted this function, much to the bewilderment of exegetes and translators. Blood symbols therefore gain meaning only in specific cultural or religious contexts. This fluidity, however, should not blind us to structural similarities.

Douglas states: “The metaphors of the physical body and of the new undertaking relate to the perfection and completeness of the individual and his work. . . . Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.”¹⁷ Although blood may indicate the essence of life, identity, and belonging, blood that has left the body confuses categories, and thus the social and religious order. Yet such disorder, which disturbs pattern, also provides the material of pattern. It “has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power. Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder.”¹⁸ Blood that has crossed the boundaries of the body fills us with ambivalent emotions. It reeks of danger, affecting the sensorium in ways that surpass the merely rational. Some people faint when they smell or see blood; others feel disgusted or shocked. After an accident, spilled blood is washed away quickly. Yet blood is simultaneously and typically seen as very powerful. Exchanged, it creates blood relations or blood brotherhood. It is used in magic spells and sacrifices.

Douglas presents a number of recurrent ways in which humans deal with such matter out of place.¹⁹ A first way to assuage the unease and disturbance caused by lost blood in society, and to control the anomaly, is to ignore it or remove it from sight. Good girls do not show that they are menstruating; media advertisements for hygienic products use blue rather than red ink to show their absorption power; and politicians speak of precision bombing or collateral damage rather than the spilling of human blood. During wars, whether the media can show blood is a hotly contested issue: both parties try to control the showing of blood because it can have important political effects, both for the struggle and for its legitimation.

A second way to control the anomaly of blood is to sequester its danger and potential power through ritual. The anomalous substance that creates impurity must be cleansed through a ritual of purification. The impurity caused by all bodily excretions—not only the blood of menstruation, childbirth, disease, or violence, but also semen, vaginal fluids, urine, excretions, vomit, and pus—must be washed away and then ritually cleansed. Through this ritual, the anomalous impurity strengthens and affirms what is pure. In Islam, blood is a pollutant that has to be cleansed away before religious acts. All mosques have fountains for minor ablutions and showers for a major purification. Moreover, blood is a forbidden food.²⁰ In Judaism impure persons cleanse themselves through the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, and in Catholicism the holy-water fonts near the entrance of churches, although nowadays often standing dry, are reminders of this cleansing ritual.

Douglas also suggests a third reaction to deal with anomalies that disturb the social order: to reclassify the abnormality and bring it into a higher order, that of the divine. This occurs in Christianity when the blood shed by Christ is reclassified as Precious Blood, a sacred substance and the source of redemption. In the writings of the Apostles, it is regarded as synonymous with Jesus' Passion and Death.²¹ In contrast to the blood removed from sight, this blood is shed publicly, like the blood spilled in honor killings and ritual beheadings.

These examples show that the structural aspect of blood is not that it can be holy or polluting but that it is a fluid that matters because it is out of the normal order, and as such imbued with religious power. Just like fluid matters themselves, the symbolic significance with which it is invested is not immutable and permanent. When we look at blood, how can its symbolic meaning fluctuate with gender?

Gendering Blood in Christianity

On the one hand, in many ways women and men have similar bodies, and blood seems to be a gender-neutral fluid. On the other hand, men and women are not the same in the ways they lose blood and in the ways meanings are attributed to this blood. For women, bleeding indicates the rhythm and phases of their fertile life. The menarche (first bleeding) signals the onset of the reproductive phase and menopause (last bleeding) indicates the end of it. Blood can stand for life power and reproductive health. Blood out of place, however, could indicate the loss of this life power—lack of conception, miscarriage, infertility, abortion. Female bodies suffer more frequently than male bodies from uncontrollable blood loss, because women menstruate and give birth, resulting not only in blood loss during labor but also in lochia until forty days after delivery. Moreover, their social role as carers means that they handle blood in daily life more often than men. They attend more regularly to the wounds of their children and partners, or do so more often professionally as nurses. They clean up the fluid matter left by family members, the sick, and the wounded. Women's ability to give birth, but also the monthly "curse" and their caring activities, are part of a culturally prescribed femininity that defines them as "Woman."

Women's bleeding and women's handling of blood seems to have influenced women's space in Catholicism in a number of ways. At present, women and women's blood are not defined as impure by the Catholic Church, but certain religious texts, rituals, and arguments still remind us of such a connotation. The Scriptures mention women's impurity due to menstruation and childbirth. Leviticus 12:1–5 states:

Yahweh said to Moses: Tell the Israelites: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch

any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood.

According to this part of the Old Testament, a woman's birthing and loss of blood during and after giving birth defiled her and excluded her from sacred spaces, rites, and functions until a male priest made an offering on her behalf. They constituted a gender-based pollution that needed purification. Moreover, not only her own sex but also that of her children was involved. The defilement was twice as long when the child was a girl. Leviticus specifically informs Judaic law and, to a much lesser extent, Catholic doctrine. Officially these rules do not apply to Catholic women. Nevertheless, such texts are present in the Old Testament, which people may have in their houses and read. Moreover, it seems to have informed the ritual of churching, although the Catholic Church does not explicitly refer to Leviticus in this context.

Until the 1960s, it was common among Dutch Catholics for a woman to undergo the ritual of churching (*Benedictio mulieris post partum*) about a month to forty days after giving birth.²² Only she and the priest participated, on a normal weekday, in this non-obligatory, simple, and scarcely noticed ritual. Women commonly understood it to be necessary before they could enter the church and, especially, partake of communion again. This meant that mothers were not present at the baptism of their babies, as this needed to be done as soon as possible after birth to save the soul for heaven in case the infant died. In the churching ritual, the woman knelt with a burning candle outside the door of the church until the priest came to bless her with holy water. He read Psalm 23, let her touch the end of his stole, and led her into the church, guiding her to the altar while saying: "Enter into the temple of God, and adore the Son of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who gave you fruitfulness of offspring." Normally the new mother would offer her burning candle and/or some flowers to Mary and make a donation to the church. At the conclusion, she would be sprinkled with holy water again and blessed.

Since Pope Paul V (1605–21), the churching ritual has been presented simply as an act of thanksgiving.²³ Before that, the clergy plainly considered it a purification rite, as historical sources show. Paula Rieder, for example, describes how in 1270 Bishop Nicholas Gennet of Angers sought to control the churching ritual in order to avoid mothers of illegitimate children also purifying themselves in this way.²⁴ Despite the Church's repeated insistence that it is no longer a purification ritual but a rite of joy and thanksgiving to God for the birth of a child, many of the women who underwent churching nevertheless

considered it to be a rite of transition and purification.²⁵ They were given the impression that this ritual was needed for them to be reintegrated into the religious community and to be considered worthy of participating in the Eucharist again. Some women found it humiliating, because they had to wait outside at the door of the church—in our own mothers' case, the side door—because they were not allowed to enter the church before the priest permitted them to. Dutch Catholic women increasingly started objecting to this rite. Why, they asked, did they need to be reintegrated into the church in this humiliating way after having given birth? Since the 1960s, this ritual has disappeared in the Netherlands, and the baptism of new-born babies has been delayed so that mothers can participate in the ritual and their motherhood be blessed.²⁶

The early Christian and medieval idea that a woman becomes impure because of the blood she loses during and after childbirth recalls Judaic law. Mary, being a Jewish woman, followed this law and was ritually purified before she entered the Temple forty days after the birth of Jesus, when she presented her son to Simeon. The churching ritual imitates this event, which is commemorated on Candlemas (February 2). According to later Catholic doctrine, as in the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Mary as mother of God was born without original sin and therefore not subject to the pains of childbirth and other physical inconveniences of ordinary women, and thus never impure. The issue of whether Mary menstruated led to heated debates in the Middle Ages, because some assumed that she needed to have menstruated in order to be able to produce milk to feed her child.²⁷ According to the dogma of Perpetual Virginity (affirmed at the Lateran Council of 649), her hymen remained intact during both conception and birth. That she nevertheless followed the purifying rite was explained and valued as a sign of obedience to the priestly laws. This explanation was convenient when the Catholic Church wanted to uphold Mary's example to women.

A more fundamental impact of women's bleeding on women's place in Catholicism lies in reference to their bodies as an argument for why they cannot become priests, bishops, or popes. The fact that a woman's body—in particular, her menstruating and birthing body—does not resemble that of Christ disqualifies her for the priesthood. In Catholic doctrine, women are not allowed to perform the sacrament of consecration because they do not resemble Jesus, as males do. They have a different body, a body that may pollute the holy altar when they menstruate. In Douglas's terms, this would confuse categories and mix the holy with the impure.

Men's dealings with blood are quite different from women's. Men bleed more often on the battlefield or spill blood as soldier, terrorist, executioner, or as the groom who deflowers his bride. The authority to kill, butcher, or deflower is what in many cultures defines men as "Man"; militarism and sexual prowess are recurrent aspects of hegemonic masculinities. Women can also be killers, soldiers, or terrorists. Their share in such things is even on the increase, but they are still a minority there. Displaying male blood, provided it is in the proper context, such as heroes who have sacrificed their lives for their nation

or martyrs who have died for their faith, has historically been seen as more appropriate than displaying female blood. Such blood becomes a sign of men's uncommon sacrifice or holiness. In this line of thought, all the blood seen in depictions of the suffering Christ as he is tortured and crucified accrues to his holiness. At times, reclassification strategy conflicts with the removal strategy that is intent on moving all spilled blood out of sight, leading to heated discussions—for instance, on the violence and blood shown in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, by Mel Gibson.

It is through consuming holy male blood that salvation can be reached. It is the male fluid that matters most. The bleeding heart of Christ is sometimes accompanied by the bleeding heart of Mary, but it is Christ's blood that is consumed, not Mary's. Thus blood also matters in defining gender, because male blood is valued more highly than female blood, making the first more often holy and precious, and the latter more often abject. This expresses an unequal gender valuation. Moreover, it helps to exclude women from the priesthood.

Gendering Blood in Islam

In Islam, the limitation of women's religious practice due to their impurity caused by blood is much more explicit. Pollution is a part of everyday life; the normal functioning of the body brings impurity upon it. The Qur'an admonishes believers to wash themselves before praying when they are polluted (S. 4:43 and 5:6). The main verse on pollution does not specify the blood of menstruation or childbirth:

Believers, do not approach your prayers when you are drunk, but wait till you can grasp the meaning of your words; nor when you are polluted—unless you are traveling the road—until you have washed yourselves. If you are ill and cannot wash yourselves; or, if you have relieved yourselves or had intercourse with women while traveling and can find no water, take some clean sand and rub your faces and your hands with it. Gracious is God and forgiving.

Although the verse addresses male believers, it is not gender specific. Pollution is a fact of life for both sexes, and both need to purify themselves. Only pure believers can pray or fast, touch the Qur'an, enter the mosque, or go on pilgrimage to holy places. A minor ablution will purify the uncleanness incurred by contact with unclean substances such as: pus; alcohol; solid, liquid, or gaseous emissions from the body; the hands of non-Muslims; or forbidden foods. A major ablution is needed after sexual intercourse, menstruation, childbirth, or death.

During research in Algeria in the 1980s, Willy Jansen found that Muslim women closely associated ritual ablution and sexuality, in particular, having had sex or preparing for sexual intercourse. The word for washing had the double meaning of having sex.

Women who allowed outsiders to see their wet hair or who went too frequently to the bathhouse were talked about as being very sexually active. One woman said she preferred to get up in the middle of the night to wash herself after intercourse, in order not to expose her nightly activity. Another woman reported that it was very improper for a young wife to let her father-in-law see her carrying washing water in the morning, as he was supposed to remain oblivious of the possibility that she had had sex with his son. Washing was also a euphemism for menstruation. A woman who said that it had been seven weeks since she washed meant that she did the ritual purification after her last menstruation seven weeks ago, and thus let it be known that she was probably pregnant. Women had to purify themselves more frequently than men both because they menstruated, gave birth, or had polluting caring roles and because they had less control over intercourse. Although men also became impure by intercourse, women saw their lack of control over sexuality as a lack of control over being religious. As one woman exclaimed: "A woman is like a sink. Her husband dumps everything in her and she has to wash and wash. A woman keeps washing. When I was young I had to sleep every night with my husband and went every two or three days to the bathhouse. I had to because I prayed."²⁸ Women's reproductive bodies and roles meant more impurity for them, and as a result more restrictions on their religious activity. Praying, fasting, or making a pilgrimage are not valid acts when performed in an impure state. During the month of Ramadan, many women lost a few days because they were menstruating. They had to make up for this later, when it was much more difficult, because they had to do it alone. Given the difficulties of remaining pure as a young wife and mother, many Algerian women in their child-bearing years temporarily gave up praying five times a day, although they practiced fasting, because they found it too inconvenient to continually be cleansing themselves. It was mostly postmenopausal women who could fully commit themselves to religion.²⁹ Due to the purity rules, women had more days with no access to or protection from the supernatural than men, and as such were *de facto* lesser as religious persons. Moreover, this more frequent impurity of women led in practice to a common perception of women as impure beings.

Male blood, although in principle similarly polluting, has been invested with other meanings. Martyrs for the faith, mostly male, are not considered to have become polluted by their death, as other people are, but go straight to heaven. The blood drawn by male Shi'ite participants in the passion play in Karbala on the 10th of Muharram, commemorating the death of Ali's son al-Husain, is considered sacrificial blood. It is invested with powerful meanings, and some onlookers take some of this blood to bless their children. In a similar vein, followers collect the blood that flows from the bodies of flagellating Sufis in Morocco to gain protection from the evil eye,³⁰ and only males are allowed to slaughter a sacrificial animal—preferably a ram, free from any physical defects, whose blood must flow unhindered. According to Anton Blok, the ram is the meritorious animal for sacrifice. It is known for its "virility, sacrality, beauty, strength, and fierceness," and it

is closely identified with human males, especially male heroes. He found evidence for the ritual prominence of rams and their close identification with male leaders and heroes in art, myths, legends, and narratives. According to Genesis (22:9–13), Abraham sacrificed a ram caught in a thicket by its horns instead of his son Isaac, a substitution that is commemorated every year by millions of Muslims in the slaughter of sheep during the Feast of Immolation. In Blok's words: "no other animal came so close to epitomizing the character of what was considered the ideal and quintessential male leader."³¹

The greater value placed upon the male sacrifice and the male sacrificer serves as a model for gender differences, but it works only on a symbolic level, not a material one. Paradoxically, the ram's virility—only one male is required to cover roughly fifty ewes—makes male sheep also the relatively dispensable sex. Not many rams are needed for the reproduction of a flock of sheep, and so they can readily be used up as objects of consumption and ritual. In many other sectors of animal husbandry, such as chickens, pigs, or cattle, males also face an early death: but then the scarcity of male animals can help to boost their ritual value again. This paradox is rarely discussed in analyses of such systems of classification. It shows that ritual value need not necessarily be correlated with material value and actual substance.

Milk

In the history of Christianity, milk had life-giving meanings similar to those of blood. The promised land is described as the land of milk and honey in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:7–8). Human milk was physical and spiritual nourishment for God and ordinary mortals. In the New Testament, milk stands for the beginnings of belief in the word of God (1 Cor. 3:1–2). In Islam, the fast during Ramadan is broken with milk and dates, and in the Qur'an milk is considered a prized food: "In cattle too you have a worthy lesson. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, between the bowels and the blood-streams: pure milk, pleasant for those who drink it."³² In paradise, believers are promised that they will find "rivers of milk for ever fresh."³³ As a bodily fluid, milk seems to be feminine par excellence. The high value attributed to milk in both religions leads to the expectation that it could counterbalance the gender imbalance created by blood.

Holy Milk in Christianity

In early Christianity and the Middle Ages, Mary's milk functioned as a key icon of relatedness—between Mary and her child, between Mary and God the Father, and between God, Mary, and devotees. The oldest representations are found in Byzantine and Coptic icons of the Galaktotrophusa (Mother of God as Milk Giver). In a Florentine painting of ca. 1402, now in the Cloisters in New York, Mary's milk is presented as on a par with Jesus'

blood. In this painting we see a kneeling Jesus, who shows his wounds to God above; opposite him kneels Mary, of a similar size, who shows her right breast to God and simultaneously points her right hand toward the sinners kneeling at their feet to ask mercy for them. Their holy fluids form the connection between the believers and their Lord. That the milk has a very strong appeal can be read in the inscription: "Dearest son, because of the milk I gave you, have mercy on them."³⁴ In his *Confessions*, Augustine compares mother's milk with heavenly consolation, and elsewhere he cannot decide whether to receive nourishment from the wound in Christ's side or from Mary's breast. Here he too puts holy blood and holy milk on the same level.³⁵ In the writings of theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Anselm, and Bernard of Clairvaux, God's breasts are conflated with Mary's breasts. In Ode 19 of the Odes of Solomon, an early Christian collection, the masculine and feminine aspects of the Holy Trinity transform into each other. The milk of salvation, which imparts life, proceeds from the Father, but the womb of the Virgin received it, and she underwent conception and gave birth.³⁶ In the words of Margaret Miles: "In communities under siege from plague, wars and malnutrition, the Virgin's breast was a symbol of God's loving provision of life, the nourishment and care that sustain life, and the salvation that promises eternal life."³⁷

In pictorial art, this symbol of God's loving provision of life was long present in the representation of Mary's breast—a male provision embodied in a female fluid. Mary's bare breast while suckling her child can be admired in such paintings as: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Madonna of the Milk* (fourteenth century); Filippino Lipi, *The Virgin and Child* (ca. 1457); Jacopo Tintoretto, *Nursing Madonna* (sixteenth century); Jean Fouquet, *Madonna Surrounded by Seraphs and Cherubs* on the Melun Diptych (ca. 1450); Hans Memling, *Tondo with Nursing Madonna* (1485–90); Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Holy Family* (ca. 1525); Joos van Cleve, *The Holy Family* (ca. 1512–13); Peter Paul Rubens, *The Madonna with the Periwinkle* (sixteenth century); and Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Holy Family in the Carpenter's Shop* (ca. 1634). The lactating Mary is also represented in statues, such as the *Lady of the Cloister* in the cathedral of Tarragona and the *Virgin of the Port* in Plasencia, Spain, and in frescoes by unknown artists in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century churches such as St. Proculus in Naturns or the Basilica of San Zeno in Verona.

Some early images seem either to lack craftsmanship or to express a certain discomfort with showing a lactating mother. Mary's body is rigid and straight. Her breasts seem dislocated, either placed near her shoulder (Memling, van Aelst) or too far apart (Fouquet). They are partly covered by her hand or by an oversized baby Jesus, are blackened, as if their skin differed from the rest of her body (the statue in Tarragona), or are privatized by the protective presence of Joseph. Fouquet's painting has been discredited by the rumor that the nursing woman it depicts is actually Agnès Sorel, the mistress of Charles VII, who so bewitched his treasurer, Étienne Chevalier, that he commissioned the painting.³⁸ Yet the very sight of a lactating Mary is powerful, as it is reminiscent of people's earliest experiences and so connects with the intimate life of common believers, drawing

parallels between everyday and supernatural relatedness, between physical and spiritual relatedness.

Depictions of a lactating Mary become even more powerful when she does not reserve her milk for Christ but shares it with special devotees. In the painting *Madonna of Grace* (ca. 1508), by Filotesi dell'Amatrice, Mary squeezes her bountiful milk out of both breasts in a half circle of rays into the mouths of the souls in purgatory. Such representations of Mary were quite common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy.³⁹ Miracles are attributed to Mary's milk. She is reputed to have spilled some milk while nursing Jesus in a cave in Bethlehem on their flight to Egypt, and this miraculously turned the black cave walls white. From the twelfth century on, lactating women visited this Milk Grotto, as they believed that eating some of the white powder from the walls would increase their supply of milk.⁴⁰ In the English fourteenth-century *Queen Mary Psalter*, one illustration shows "How a monk with an ulcerated mouth was laid out as dead, and how the Virgin healed him with milk from her breast."⁴¹

Mother Mary's breast and milk were also central in the Dominican cult of the Virgin's milk. Mary was believed to have shared this milk of paradise with such saints as the Blessed Paula of Florence (who received it in a vision in 1368) and St. Bernard of Clairveaux (1090–1153), in what is called the Lactatio of St. Bernard. In some early depictions of his adoration of Mary as intercessor to the Savior, the passing on of the faith is given visual form by a Holy Mother who spouts milk from her breast into St. Bernard's mouth or onto his head.⁴² In other depictions, he merely watches devoutly while she nurses her baby.

Unlike blood, milk has lost much of its meaning in Christianity. Mary's bare breasts and her milk have undergone a process of resignification, followed by erasure from religious art. In the late fifteenth century, techniques of graphic representation improved, and Mary's breasts were depicted more and more realistically. They took on the softness and roundedness of real breasts and came to evoke feelings of domestic intimacy. Moreover, female breasts gained other meanings in artworks of that time: they signified penitence, served as erotic assets, or became objects of study. Reacting to this development, the Catholic Church banned the nudity of sacred figures in art at the Council of Trent in 1593.⁴³ Not only naked breasts but also physically well-endowed and motherly feminine forms receded into the background in religious art, to be replaced by an elfin, childlike Virgin. Images of the frail and ephemeral Virgin of Lourdes or Fatima are now the most popular, and reproductions of such images can be found in many churches and homes. In the late twentieth century, women's visits to the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem also declined sharply, and knowledge of the shrine is dying out. According to Susan Starr Sered, most Christians in the area now "have either never heard of it or claim that it is a place visited only by superstitious women."⁴⁴ Believers have distanced themselves from the bodily materiality of Mary, and her feminine forms are more and more disguised.⁴⁵

Today, the lactating Mary appears only in provocative and, in the eyes of believers, blasphemous art, such as the photograph *Untitled #223*, by Cindy Sherman, in which a plastic breast is offered to a baby; a series of icons by the Dutch artist Myrna Rasker, in which Mary suckles a green, monstrous animal; or in the elephant-dung-covered black breasts of *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), by the British-Nigerian artist Chris Ofili. Cardinal O'Connor called this painting "an attack on religion," and the Catholic mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, found this work so offensive and disgusting that he threatened to stop the subsidy of 7.2 million dollars to the Brooklyn Museum if they dared to display it in their exhibition *Sensations* in 2000.⁴⁶

Religious as well as nonreligious art depicting the nursing Mary, as well as the reactions to it, demonstrate two of the ways of dealing with matter out of place explained above: reclassifying it as holy, or labeling it as degrading and removing it from sight. In the late Middle Ages, milk was represented as the nourishment of God and a sacred substance. It stood on a par with blood and could even be conflated with it, as when Christ was described as a nursing mother by mystics such as Catherine of Siena and Juliana of Norwich.⁴⁷ Yet when women's breasts came to be associated too closely with sexuality, prostitution, and nakedness, Mary's milk lost its former power and was largely obliterated from religious discourse. At the same time, the presentation of the Holy Blood in crucifixion scenes became increasingly strong and violent. Rather than analyze this straightforwardly as a unilinear marginalization of the feminine, however, we should take a more complex view. Carolyn Walker Bynum, for instance, has shown that these changes varied considerably across regions and that at times gender differentiation was far from clear.⁴⁸ Gail Paterson Corrington warns that the models provided by bodily metaphors should not be assumed to be the "true" representation of "the way things are." For instance, motherly metaphors might serve as models for how women ought to be, rather than being based on women's experiences and being representations of them, or they might symbolize something other than what we expect. In her alternative, critical-feminist interpretation, pre-Christian metaphors derived from childbirth and nursing, once applied to female deities, were "appropriated for application to male models as descriptive of modes of communicating divine wisdom and protection."⁴⁹ In her view, the metaphor of nursing described the saving activities of the male savior-deity, not those of Mary, as Mary is not the savior. This gender reversal, however, is an uncomfortable metaphor, and thus does not dominate early Christian art. Moreover, she argues, "the motif of the lactating mother was eschewed in Mary's case because she is a model for "overcoming" the material by the spiritual, the female by the male."⁵⁰ In other words, in early Christianity, first, the symbol of women's milk, indicating women's divine power, was appropriated and resignified to indicate the milk of salvation emanating from the divine father and later the divine child, as male deities were substituted for female deities, and second, the substance of women's milk lost its role as religious signifier.

The Milk of Relatedness in Islam

Islamic doctrine has never given any place to female deities or holy figures with blessed milk. Yet the Qur'an, even more often than the Bible, heralds Mary as a worthy example for women. This respect for Mary has occasionally led to devotional practices among Muslim women similar to those among Christians, including ones connected with Mary's milk.⁵¹ In western Turkey, Muslim women are known to visit a Milk Grotto to partake in the healing powers of the fluid seeping through the stones.⁵² And the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem is also visited by Muslim women.⁵³

In Islam the religious investment in mother's milk has taken a different turn, however. The symbolic role of human milk has gained special meaning because of Qur'anic verse 4:23. This verse specifies the marriage partners that are forbidden, and these include a foster mother and foster siblings. Glosses on this verse say that women who suckle children who are not born to them establish kinship relations with these children. Through the milk it ingests, a child who has been suckled takes in the essence of its nurse and her family, thus becoming related to them. A woman's milk, transmitted to a child, transforms their relation into a kinship relation, one with religious approval. Children will always recognize and respect their foster mother and her family, and the tie between them is so strong that it is considered incest for them to intermarry.⁵⁴

Islamic jurisprudence raised the question of who owns human milk and established a claim that a husband owns his spouse's milk. In everyday life, women managed to gain some control over their milk, and they used it subversively to include outsiders in their kinship network or exclude others as marriage partners for their children. With the arrival of bottled milk, the need for fostering was reduced, as was the ability of women to create relatedness through their milk.

Conclusion

Analysis of the religious meanings given to blood and milk in holy texts and religious practices in Christianity and Islam shows that these bodily fluids matter in creating cogent links between people and their religion. In them, a conflation of material and spiritual substance embodies and anchors religion. This is not necessarily a direct and clear connection with only one interpretation, but rather an ambiguous, complex, and fluid process. In the symbolic universe of Christianity and Islam, conflicting and at times opposing connotations are given to blood and milk. Blood can refer to holiness, purification, and salvation, life-giving qualities. But it can also take on the opposite connotations, being regarded as a destructive, polluting substance. Milk can represent God's love, divine intimacy, or motherly protection, on the one hand, and nakedness, blasphemy, or offensive sexuality, on the other. Meanings given to matter are fluid and subject to change.

In the process of the transmission and transformation of bodily liquids, people are constructed not only as believers but also as men and women. The gendering of blood and milk functions to represent, on a symbolic level, the social hierarchy between men and women. According to Douglas, ideas and rituals about purity and impurity caused by bodily fluids work on both expressive and instrumental levels. On the first level they “are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order,” and on the second level “we find people trying to influence one another’s behaviour.”⁵⁵ The different evaluation given to male and female blood thus expresses and constructs the hierarchical social order between the sexes.

Some scholars who have discussed the pollution caused by female blood have warned against automatically reading into it gender inequality and the submission of women. Elizabeth Faithorn suggests that substances are polluting, not the people who secrete them. Male substances, such as semen, can be as polluting as female substances, such as menstrual blood.⁵⁶ We have seen above that this also is true for the substances considered polluting in Islam. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb warn that the focus on the polluting and disempowering aspects of menstruation has prevented us from seeing that in some contexts it can have the opposite meaning and effect—that of celebrating and effectuating women’s power.⁵⁷ We agree with these authors that masculine pollutants should not be neglected and that women should be seen not only as victims in the cultural constructions of purity and taboo but as active agents participating in creating these cultural constructs and thereby gaining empowerment. Women’s active role in Marian pilgrimage, for example, expresses a preference for the female mediator over the male God, and attributing alternative meanings to Mary, in line not with doctrine but with women’s own aims and empowerment, indicates a clear religious agency and interpretative power.⁵⁸

Gendering is neither automatic nor static, but fluid and dependent on context. Yet despite the fact that it is substances, not people, that are considered taboo and despite women’s own interpretations of blood and milk as life-giving and indicative of their reproductive role in society, we should not ignore the underlying tendency to devalue female blood and laud male blood, as well as the effects this has on women as believers. The gender connotations encased in the religious meanings given to blood and milk do express different power positions in society and religion. Indeed, both textual data and believers’ experiences show that impurity through the fluids related to sexuality, excretion, illness, and death is not gender neutral, because women, due to menstruation, childbirth, submission to their husbands in sexual matters, and caring tasks have far less control over their impurity and are far more frequently impure. As a result, not just their fluids but women themselves are at times considered impure beings and as such considered religiously less worthy.

In speaking of gender, Douglas prefers to remain on the symbolic level, as can be seen when she discusses the dangers attributed to sexual fluids: “I suggest that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of

society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system.”⁵⁹ By contrast, we have argued that the idiom of blood and milk also functions on the material level, influencing people’s behavior and actual access to religious practice and ritual. Because of their blood, women cannot perform the sacrament of transubstantiation in the Catholic Mass or the sacrificial killing of sheep at Islamic feasts. It significantly limits women’s space to practice their religion or become religious leaders, compared to that of men. Thus cultural constructs have consequences in the material world.

The relation between the diminished religious power of feminine fluids and changing power relations between the genders is less clear. The dominance of male blood over female blood and female milk is certainly an expression of gender and gender inequality, but in two ways it is a contested dominance. First, secularization has significantly decreased the impact of such religious symbols and beliefs on actual gender relations. Second, our research has shown that many of those Catholics who still believe—in particular, women—prefer the alternative religious practice of Marian pilgrimage over going to church and obeying religious authorities.⁶⁰ In doing so, they empower and resignify Mary and endow her with other and more powerful feminine qualities than the Church has done. In other pilgrimages, we found women who no longer reinterpreted Mary to regain respect for their body and bodily fluids, such as the Swedish middle-aged women who discovered themselves as big, strong, and happy on the way to Santiago, or the Spanish and American women who deposited their menstrual blood on the altar in the cave of Mary Magdalene in France as a way to connect with mother earth and the forces of life.⁶¹