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A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity

Edited by Kristin De Troyer,
Judith A. Herbert,
Judith Ann Johnson,
Anne-Marie Korte
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The pharmacist no longer automatically places it in a paper bag, but the preference is still for the sanitary napkin to be invisible: it is becoming thinner and thinner all the time and is preferably pleasantly packaged. Since the introduction of the plastic layer, the fear of leaking that accompanied my menstruation during puberty is mostly a thing of the past, but the taboo of menstrual blood has yet to diminish. Why else should the unprecedented absorption capability of that superthin sanitary napkin of the advertisements be illustrated, not with red, but with blue fluid? Menstrual blood is not the only form of “feminine” blood loss that incurs such a fate; other forms also remain conspicuously hidden. Thus most women have no knowledge of the amount of blood that is lost during delivery or miscarriage until the time comes, and they experience it for themselves.

This taboo of feminine blood loss is not just a by-product of, for example, a modern emphasis on hygiene but can be found in numerous times and cultures.¹ In contrast to these often negative assessments of feminine blood loss stands the awe with which the masculine confrontation with blood is frequently clothed. Much more than women, men have the power to intentionally shed blood: as soldier, sacrificial priest, first lover, “blood brother,” executioner, perpetrator of violent offenses, or as physician (in those cultures where the healing function is reserved for

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men). Practically all of these forms of intentional shedding of blood confer upon the shedder of blood honor or holiness; at the very least they confer respect and a hint of power.

Such a gender-based double standard for contact with blood is especially developed in religious contexts. Generally, in these contexts, the blood loss that is a part of feminine fertility is explicitly unclean, while the intentional shedding of blood, particularly in the form of the sacrifice, is clothed in sacred power. What is the origin of this sharp contrast between the honorable or even sacred aspects of the contact with blood, on the one hand, and the thoroughly dishonorable and unclean aspects of it, on the other hand (blood being a neuter substance in itself, after all)?

In this essay, I search for an answer to this question. My point of departure is the Roman Catholic tradition, a tradition that forms a striking example of such an ambivalent recognition and appreciation of blood. The holy sacrifice of the mass, the remembrance of the body and blood of Christ, is central to Roman Catholic worship. Christ is supposed to have given his body and blood for the salvation of sinners, and in the holy sacrifice of the mass, this sacrifice is repeated in the sacred acts of the priests. To be permitted to perform these holy acts, the ultimate requirement for priests is to keep themselves as far away from that “natural” body and blood, the body and blood of women. Roman Catholic priests must still not have the body of a woman nor touch the body of women; in other words, they must be celibate men. Under certain conditions, female pastoral workers, without the ordination of priesthood, can preside over a service, but they can never perform the consecration. While bodily contact with a woman is no longer explicitly considered as defiling, as was the case in earlier eras, the fact that the body of women, especially the reproductive function of women, was not allowed to associate with the divine still affects the assessment of women in the Roman Catholic Church. The nonordination of women is one outcome; another is the ritual of churching, which was common in the Roman Catholic community in the Netherlands until the 1960s.

The ritual of churching preceded the first church attendance of a woman who had recently given birth. During the first weeks after

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2. In 1991, the Nijmegen Center for Women's Studies, on the initiative of Willy Jansen, organized an interdisciplinary lecture series around the theme Bloedbanden, bloedschande (Blood Bonds, Blood Shame). In its original form, this chapter was a part of this lecture series.
3. During the consecration, bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ by the ritual words and acts of the priest.
childbirth—the time in which she was supposed to lose some blood—a new mother remained outside the church. The ritual of churching marked the end of this period and served traditionally as a symbolic purification. In the first half of this chapter, I will focus on this ritual and on its background. In the second half, I examine the work of various authors in an attempt to come up with an explanation for the aforementioned ambivalence in dealing with blood. Although in anthropological literature, especially in women's studies, menstruation taboos receive much attention, their connection with the other side of the confrontation with blood, blood shed as a sacred act, remains underdeveloped. That is unfortunate, because the extremes mentioned above—of defilement and highest honor—are strongly gendered. The ambivalence of contact with blood casts a sharp light on the gendered balance of power in the cultures in question, particularly on the way in which biological differences between the sexes are observed, valued, and symbolically emphasized.

The Ritual of Churching

The ritual of churching was not obligatory for Roman Catholic women, but until about the middle of the 1950s was rather inevitable—as a social obligation or because the pastor expected the new mother to do so. Some forty days after the delivery, the woman had to report herself to the priest, to be solemnly reintroduced into the church. The woman was not supposed to set foot in the church, and especially not to receive Holy Communion, before the ritual of churching had occurred. A new mother could therefore not be present for the baptism of her child because baptism had to take place quite soon after birth (as a precaution should the newborn die, since unbaptized children would not go to heaven).4

At this first solemn visit to church after the birth, the woman had to kneel by the church door, with a burning candle in her hand, and wait for the parish priest. In some parishes, she carried her newborn with her. The priest sprinkled the woman with holy water, read Ps 24 (placing emphasis on the glory of God’s kingdom and purity of life), offered her the end of his white stole, and blessed her saying, “Enter the temple of God, worship the Son of the Virgin Mary, who has

4. In the late Middle Ages, the idea that unbaptized children would not be permitted to enter heaven (as all the unbaptized would not be permitted) softened to the idea of the so-called limbo, in which innocent children would have to wait until the end of time for their salvation.
granted you fertility." With the woman holding the end of his stole, he led her to the high altar. After kneeling before the holy sanctuary on the high altar, they stood before the altar of Mary. Here the woman knelt again, still holding the candle, and the priest said some other prayers. The woman offered the burning candle and a bunch of flowers or a small monetary gift. Then the priest again sprinkled the woman with holy water and blessed her. Through this ritual she was, as it were, solemnly reintroduced into the church and, especially, dignified to participate once more in Holy Communion.

The original basis for this ritual was the conviction that the woman became impure through parturition, particularly through the blood she lost during and after parturition. Jewish law (Lev 12:1–8) laid down provisions concerning the purification of new mothers. These provisions were thus known to Christianity as a regulation of Jewish law. As a Jewish woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus, also held herself to this law and submitted herself to purification after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:22). Later Christian tradition believed that Mary, as the mother of God, did not become impure through parturition and that even her virginity remained intact through conception and delivery. That the Virgin, although she did not become impure from normal childbirth or lochia, did not withdraw from being purified was explained by the Roman Catholic Church as a sign of fidelity to priestly rule. This explanation served the church well when, in the course of time, it formally abandoned the idea that women became impure through childbirth but held on to the ritual of churching—thus threatening the rite with senselessness.

The official explanation of the ritual of churching became then that this rite referred to the purification of Mary, to which she submitted herself faithfully, even though she did not become impure. The rite was thus interpreted as a remembrance of Mary's faithfulness and as a thanksgiving after birth. The rather progressive Liturgisch Woordenboek (Liturgical Dictionary) from 1967 even asserted that the ritual must be seen as a "statement of homage from the church for motherhood"! In spite of—or possibly just because of—this explicit denial of the character of purification, most Roman Catholic women continued to experience the rite as purification for these reasons: because of the advice not to go to

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5. The stole is a long kind of sash, hanging down at both sides from the neck and colored differently according to the liturgical occasion.
Communion before being churched; because she was asked to kneel, waiting for the priest to sprinkle her with holy water; because of the words that accompanied Ps 24 in the folder that she received when she entered the church; because of the way she was introduced into the church, holding the end of the priest’s stole; and last, but not least, because of the complex reference to the purification of Mary. And so in the course of the 1950s, more and more women—as if it were something in the air—became irritated by the ritual and rejected it. Why, they wondered, did they have to be reintroduced into the church this way after giving birth?

Rebirth

In general, women participate more faithfully and conscientiously in Roman Catholic rituals than men. The fact that the rite of churching was the first of the ancient Roman Catholic rituals to be given up in the late fifties of the last century tells a tale. Apparently this churching, in spite of all its beautiful interpretations, was experienced by the women involved as profoundly inappropriate and deservedly so, as the following analysis shows.

Let us take a closer look at the symbolism involved in the rite. The priest leads the new mother into the church by a kind of tie. Childbirth placed her, as it were, outside the community participating in Communion, but she is brought back into this community by the priest, connected to him via his stole. Does the ritual not resemble a kind of reverse, metaphorical birth, a symbolic rebirth? Reintroduced into the church by the priest, connected to him by a ritual umbilical cord, the new mother is symbolically reborn, returned into the community. The candle that she carries, symbol of the light of Christ, also symbolizes this: returned from the darkness, she is carrying the light of Christ that is guarded by the church.

The same priest that churched the new mother had, in most cases, baptized her child a few weeks earlier. By being baptized, the child was incorporated into the church in the most fundamental way. Baptism, too, is a rite of purification and rebirth (symbolized by the water) and a transition from the world of darkness into the light (symbolized by the light

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7. “Alleen wie rein en zuiver leeft in de eenmaal aanvaarde levensstaat mag Gods tempel binnengaan en kan rekenen op Zijn overvloedige genade” (Only those who live cleanly and purely in the estate of life once accepted, may enter God’s Temple and can count on his abundant grace”).
of the baptism candle). Baptism rites in which the child or adult are entirely plunged into water represent this element of purification and rebirth most explicitly. Through baptism—that is, through the sacramental acts and words of the priest inducing baptism—the child is reborn into the church and receives his or her Christian name.

Thus, within a month after the mother’s giving birth, the priest had already performed two symbolic rebirths: he had rebirthed the child in a “better,” spiritual way, during a ritual at which the mother could not be present, and he had reintroduced the new mother into the community of Holy Communion. The fact that many new mothers came to experience the rite of churching as completely out of place may reveal that they identified with some of this symbolic appropriation of their labor.

**Interpretation and Development of the Rite in Roman Catholic Tradition**

The biblical background of the rite of churching is found in Jewish law. Leviticus 12:1–5 (NRSV) states, “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: 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.” The book of Leviticus, in which the purity laws in general play such a central part, stems from the so-called Priestly strand (P). These laws date from around the time of the Jews’ exile to Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. Probably as a result of the loss of the temple and of familiar cultural surroundings, the Israelites placed special emphasis on the symbolic borders of the social body and, as a parallel with those borders, on the boundaries of the human body, on rules of living with respect to purity and just behavior.

Such tendencies to formalism and purism are often found in cultural communities that are displaced or feel threatened. During the time of the exile there was a conspicuous sharpening of both the rules pertaining

8. Namely, she shall be ceremonially unclean to the extent to which she is unclean during the time of menstruation. The regulations listed here and the accompanying guidelines can be found in Lev 15:19 ff.
to the circumcision of boys and the rules relating to the purity of women and loss of blood.¹⁰ Leonie J. Archer has posited a relationship between the sharpening of both rules. Circumcision, as a physical sign of cultic inclusion, implied an intentional and controlled shedding of blood. According to Archer, it is not by chance that the passage concerning the circumcision of boys was inserted into the passage on the purification of new mothers. She relates this insertion to the function of circumcision, which served as a rite of cultural rebirth by which the male individual was accorded entry into the society and religion of his people. In other words, whilst women, as it were, merely conducted the animal-like repetitive tasks of carrying on the reproduction of the human race, men, by one supreme symbolic act, imposed themselves upon nature and enacted a cultural rebirth. The blood of circumcision served as a symbolic surrogate for the blood of childbirth, and because it was shed voluntarily and in a controlled manner, it transcended the bounds of nature and the passive blood flow of the mother at delivery and during the preparatory cycle for pregnancy, menstruation.¹¹

Christianity gave up the practice of circumcision as an outward sign of inclusion into the covenant. Yet in Christianity too consciously shed male blood marks the covenant: “For the ultimate cultic sacrifice and voluntary shedding of blood was seen to have been achieved in the figure of the male, circumcised, saviour Christ. He was the new and eternal Paschal lamb, he was the new Temple and law; through his blood the new covenant was established and by his blood sins were forgiven.”¹² To be part of the new covenant, Christians only have to endorse their salvation through the blood of Christ. (We will return to Archer’s elaboration of the contrast between the natural blood loss of women and the cultic shedding of blood by men later on.)

The Gospels record no incident in which the loss of female blood is disparaged. When Jesus was touched by a woman who had been bleeding for years and thus was ritually impure, he praised her for her belief, defying the protest of the onlookers (Mark 5:25–34; Matt. 9:18–26; Luke 8:40–56).¹³ Yet in early Christianity, predominantly under the

¹⁰. For a comparison, see also Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, particularly ch. 5.
¹². Ibid., 41.
¹³. For these and other examples of Jesus’ unconventional interactions with women, including their bodies, see Ruether, “Women’s Body and Blood.”
influence of gnostic thinking, the body and especially the reproductive functions of women were looked upon with more and more reserve, even rejection. The “work of women,” reproduction, was repudiated by many gnostic groups as being the cause of the imprisonment of (elements of) the Spirit into the material body from generation to generation. If people ceased procreating, the continual imprisonment of spiritual elements in matter would end, and ultimate salvation would draw near. The regulations of Leviticus concerning the impurity of women’s blood were linked to this dualistic contempt of the body, notably the procreative body. Reminiscences of these purity laws continued to haunt the texts that were developed from early Christianity onwards concerning the church attendance of new mothers and menstruating women.

In Western Christian tradition, an important text concerning the question of whether parturients and menstruating women were impure and could enter the church is found in a response written under the name of Pope Gregory the Great to the English bishop Augustine of Canterbury, the so-called Responsum beati Gregorii ad Augustinum episcopum. The letter was probably written in 731 by Nothelm, a subsequent archbishop of Canterbury, who lent it the authority of a pope whose pastoral leadership had played such a decisive role in the Chris-

14. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). As a counterpart, the virginal, “closed” body of women was bestowed ecclesiological significance. So Ambrose writes (in a passage with references to Mary, symbol of the virginal procreation that is effected in and through the church as the bride of Christ):

So the Holy Church, unstained by sexual union but fertile in bearing, is a virgin in respect to chastity, a mother in respect to offspring. And thus she labors to give us birth as a virgin, impregnated not by a man but by the Spirit. The virgin bears us not with physical pain, but with the rejoicings of angels... For what bride has more children than the holy Church?... She has no husband, but she has a bridegroom, inasmuch as she... weds the Word of God as her eternal Spouse. (*Virg. 1.31*)


17. For an analysis of the liturgical texts concerning parturients from early Christian times onwards, see the contribution of Susan Roll in the present book.

18. Regarding the question of the authenticity of the letter, see Müller, *Die Lehre des Hl.* 36 n. 10. The letter is listed in the *Patrologia Latina* amongst the letters of Gregory the Great: PL 77:1183-1200.
tianization of Europe.19 In response to the question of whether a new mother could come to church soon after childbirth, (Pseudo-)Gregory answered that she should not be forbidden to enter the church; and the same encouragement applied to women during their menses. Nevertheless, it would be good if women themselves displayed restraint in doing so, he cautioned, thus alluding to some kind of guilt, although not necessarily personal guilt. Even though women might in a strict sense not be considered guilty or impure, because their blood loss was a natural and unintentional given, it would become them to acknowledge the fact that the blood loss itself was a phenomenon of fallen nature, a consequence of original sin.20

(Pseudo-)Gregory’s response was rather ambiguous, all the more so because it was a woman, Eve, who was held responsible for the fall and the corruptio of the original, harmonious natural order. Actually, many churchmen continued to consider the lochia and menstrual blood as impure and new mothers and menstruating women as in need of special treatment. Evidence of this can be found in numerous penitential books and, from the twelfth century onwards, in the manuals for confessors (e.g., in their interdictions concerning marital intercourse during the menses).21

In the Latin church, evidence of the existence of actual services and formulae for the reintroduction of new mothers into the church can only be traced back to the eleventh century.22 Most of the rituals have reminders of the issue of purification, at least in the symbolism used (e.g., elements referring to the Feast of the Purification of Mary and to the introduction of catechumens into the church, such as the holding of the stole). From the Middle Ages onwards then, councils had to state time and again that the ritual was a rite, not of purification, but of thanksgiving to the Lord and a way of following Mary in her faithfulness. In the history of the church, however, such repeated conciliar repudiations of apparently condemnable, but in fact current, practices reveal

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19. The Moralia in Job and the Regulae Pastoralis liber of Gregorius were important handbooks in the Middle Ages.
20. See the tenth question and the accompanying answer in the letter of response mentioned above (Responsum beati Gregorii).
21. For the penitential books, see Wisse, “De kerkgang van de moeder”; and Roll, this volume. Written to be used in conversion and pastoral practice from the eighth century onwards, the penitential books converted the moral principles of Christianity into the most concrete examples of crime and punishment. Having intercourse with one’s wife while she was menstruating was always considered more or less sinful and could cause the birth of deformed or feeble-minded children.
22. For concrete examples and references, see Roll’s chapter in the present book.
the denigrating practice—in this case the interpretation of the rite of
churching as a purification—to be persistent.23

These ambiguities about purification appeared to be a fixed feature
of the ritual of churching. As we saw in the description of the rite prac-
ticed in the Netherlands in the 1950s, which was based on the formulae
offered in the *Rituale Romanum* of 1614, ambivalence continued to be
part of the rite up until its discontinuation (informally by the decision of
the women desiring to dispense with this embarrassing “blessing” and
formally after the Second Vatican Council and the insertion of the
blessing into the baptism rite).24 For example, when I was searching
dictionaries preparing for this chapter, and asked a noted, progressive
theologian (who happened to be in the library) whether he knew the
French word for “churching,” he suggested it would be *purification*.25 In
the aforementioned *Liturgisch Woordenboek* from 1967, the entry for the
keyword *kerkgang* (churching) opens with such an explicit denial of the
idea of purification that it cannot but raise one’s curiosity or even suspi-
cion: “The theological basis of the churching rite is absolutely not to be
sought in the idea of purification of Leviticus 12:2.”26 Comparable
admonitions can be found in most of the treatises on the subject by male
churchmen or theologians.27 As we have seen, these explicit repudiations
conflict with the obvious symbolism in the ritual itself, as well as with
the reference to the purification of Mary. Even if women knew that the
Roman Catholic Church did not actually deem them to be impure after
childbirth, they did connect the imitation of Mary represented in the ritu-
al with an idea of impurity in Roman Catholic tradition, that is, with
the impurity or sinfulness associated with sexuality.28 Lacking any expla-
nation of the ritual except that within the folder given to them (and in
which the few Dutch commentaries did speak of cleanliness and purity),

*Ordo Baptismi parvulorum*, nr. 70 and 247–49.
25. As I learned later, the French word for churching is relevailles (Von Arx,
“Churching of Women,” 65) or, more officially, “Bénédiction d’une femme après ses
couches.” For formulae from French rituals, see Wisse, “De kerkgang van de moeder,”
26. So Wisse describes in the introduction of her excellent M.A. thesis on the rite of
churching that it was precisely this opening sentence in the *Liturgisch Woordenboek,*
combined with the experience of being churched that a woman told her of, that raised
her curiosity about the subject (“De kerkgang van de moeder”).
27. An exception is Von Arx, who explicitly states (in opposition to Franz) that
the element of purification is present, one way or another, in most of the rituals (see Von
many women indeed interpreted being churched and ending up in front of the altar of Mary as an act of renewed dedication to the ideal of virginity.29

Nancy Jay: Transcending Mortality

The Roman Catholic Church—unlike the Eastern-Orthodox and Anglican churches—has given up the ritual of churching, but the sense of “otherness” evoked by the body and blood of women and the seeming incompatibility of aspects of physical reproduction with the most sacred acts of worship appears to subsist. Men that administer the holy body and blood of Christ must still abstain from bodily association with a woman, and women themselves are declared unfit for mediating the sacred transformation of bread and wine into body and blood of Christ. Sometimes women seem to have internalized this taboo. A female Roman Catholic pastoral worker told me that when she is assisting in services during her menses, she is always painfully aware of her condition. Imagine that the immaculate minister’s robes should betray the state she is in: would that not be the ultimate taboo, a bloodstained minister? Rosemary Radford Ruether describes another traditionalist horror vision: “What if she were pregnant at the altar?”30 Ruether identifies an implicit clerical concern: should a woman assume some priestly functions, she would have to remain unrecognizable as a woman. She would have to insert herself into the existing symbolic universe: “She will learn to preach and do the liturgy in the same way as he does. There is an avoidance of recognizing the way her mere presence as a female in the Christian ‘sacred spaces’ changes the symbolic and psychic dynamics of relationship to the holy.”31

What then would change if women stand at the altar? Or maybe we should first ask the preceding question: Why are women—notably pregnant women—declared unfit for conducting the ritual offering? This question is answered by Nancy Jay in her article “Sacrifice as Remedy for

29. Ever since I published the first version of this article (in 1992), I have heard from very many women this personal interpretation of the ritual. Some women added that because they interpreted the ritual in this way, it angered them so much, at least afterwards. Why should she be the only one to be purified from the stains associated with sexuality? (Often she had not even been the initiating party in intercourse and had been obliged to fulfill her marital duties.) Cf. Wisse, “De kerkgang van de moeder,” 125–40; Roll, “Churching of Women,” 225.
31. Ibid.
Having Been Born of Woman” and in her posthumously published book *Throughout Your Generations Forever* (in which she elaborates the earlier article). Being an anthropologist, Jay handles this question not only with regard to the Roman Catholic sacrifice of the mass but with respect to all religions in which the central acts of worship comprise some kind of blood sacrifice.

In her studies, Jay discovered that in many unrelated and very divergent religions, blood sacrifice is the crucial cultic act. In order to understand this central role of cultic blood shedding and its gender-related features, Jay found it essential to consider the particular kind of social organization and kinship structures in which the sacrificial cult originates. According to Jay, blood-sacrifice religions have prevailed in pre-capitalist societies with some degree of technological development where rights to durable (“real”) property are highly valued and where kinship is organized in unilineal, patrilinear descent groups. These qualities can be found in societies with quite divergent features, but in all those societies “the control of the means of production is inseparably linked with the control of the means of reproduction, that is, the fertility of women.” It struck Jay that gender is ignored in the great quantity of anthropological literature concerning sacrificial cults, or, in any case, the gender-related aspects of the rituals are dismissed without any reflection upon them. This is all the more astonishing when one recognizes that blood sacrifices are virtually always accompanied by gender-related rules. The most elementary of these rules introduce a sharp contrast between the purity that is required to perform the sacrificial acts and the impurity that is brought about by the processes of physical reproduction, notably by the loss of blood that is part of the female fertility process. In all of the cultures examined, only ritually pure men were allowed to perform sacrificial acts. Jay found only a few exceptions to this rule. But in the few cases where women could play a marginal role in the cult (such as drawing water to be used in the ritual), the selected women were always those excluded from the reproductive process: virgins or women past menopause.

Why were fertile women not allowed to play an active role in the sacrifice ritual? Jay looks for an answer to this question in the patrilineal

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 284.
35. Ibid. See also Johnson, this volume.
organization of kinship structures in the societies concerned, societies in which blood sacrifice plays such a central part. In these cultures, blood sacrifice implies an essential sealing of the social order. Fatherly descent (with its corresponding rights) is, in contrast to motherly descent, not defined by birth alone. Biological fatherhood can never be as certain as motherhood, no matter how close a watch is kept on the woman whose reproductive faculties are appropriated. A patrilineal society, therefore, displays a tendency to emphasize formal, symbolic fatherhood over biological fatherhood. Although, preferably, these go together, it is symbolic fatherhood that determines one's position, rights, and obligations in a patrilineal society. Biological fatherhood would be too unreliable a base upon which to build a firm social order. In order to lend to a system of lineage based on symbolic fatherhood the luster of being a system intended by the gods, the lineage has to be sealed by a symbolic deed as powerful, definite, and available to the senses as birth. In many divergent cultures membership in the patrilineal descent group is confirmed through participation in blood sacrifice (taken as an offering to the ancestors). Members can be identified not only through anthropological evidence but also by the terminology used to indicate exactly who is eligible to participate in sacrifice, or to share in the same sacrificial meat.

However, in all of these data we do not find an answer to the question of why it is blood sacrifice, and not another ritual, that plays this crucial role in symbolically confirming patrilineal descent. Jay offers

38. Jay, “Sacrifice as Remedy.” In Throughout Your Generations Forever (the title refers to a frequent sacrifice formula in Leviticus), Jay does not explicitly return to this question, at least not in the manner in which it is formulated here. In her book, Jay situates her approach explicitly within the modern structuralist studies of sacrifice of ritual (see particularly chs. 1 and 9). That is, developing her questions less from an “external” perspective, she searches to understand social and religious structures of meaning in their internal coherence and effects: “The approach taken here will not focus primarily on symbolic representations of childbirth or childbearing women but on the social contexts of sacrificial ritual, especially on the ways the practice of sacrifice affects family structures, the organized social relations of reproduction within which women bear their children” (Throughout Your Generations Forever, xxiv). Questions posed within this approach include the following: “What role does sacrificing (in any particular tradition) play in indexing social groups and their boundaries? What kinds of social structures are so identified? Who is included? Who excluded? What is the relation of women, especially childbearing women, to sacrificial practices? How is intergenerational continuity between males maintained?” (p. 147).

Apparent similarities in meaning systems between unrelated cultures must subsequently also be structurally situated “in common conditions of life, such as the way
two possible explanations. The first explanation she labels "symbolic reasons." The argument in this symbolic reasoning reads like this:

The only action that is as serious as giving birth, which can act as a counterbalance to it, is killing. This is one way to interpret the common sacrificial metaphors of birth and rebirth, or birth done better, on purpose and on a more spiritual, more exalted level than mothers do it. Unlike childbirth, sacrificial killing is deliberate, purposeful, "rational" action, under perfect control. Both birth and killing are acts of power, but sacrificial ideology commonly construes childbirth as the quintessence of vulnerability, passivity, and powerless suffering.

Jay does not elaborate on these symbolic reasons, that is, on the contrast between the valorized and controlled shedding of blood and the inferior, involuntary loss of blood by women.

In the aforementioned article by Archer, this contrast is quite explicitly worked out and in fact represents the core of her argumentation. Archer proceeds from the concept of nature-culture (a conceptual dichotomy that has been thoroughly questioned in anthropological literature during the last decade). She argues that the blood shed by men in the context of a culturally prescribed act receives higher regard than the natural, involuntary blood loss of women. The first signifies the ultimate sealing of the social order (of the social body) and is therefore looked upon as an honorable or even sacred act. The second, female blood loss, ranks as impure because bodily secretions, as "matter out of place" (Mary Douglas), represent disorder and lack of control. Particularly in societies that feel threatened, from within or from without, cultural identity will be reinforced by stressing social cohesion and by increasing the resistance

agrarian and pastoral systems of production may lead to a concern for birth- and death-transcending male intergenerational continuity" (p. 149). The titles of Jay's article and book summarize her change of focus very well. The direction and conclusions of both studies remain approximately the same, although in her book (in which she not only analyzes patrilineal sacrificial culture but also a matrilineal and a "mixed" one) her conclusions are much more varied.

39. Jay, "Sacrifice as Remedy," 293. Jay does mention "psychological reasons," but she does not name them and suggests in the subsequent sentence that the "symbolic reasons" that she is going to mention do not quite correspond with those psychological reasons. I would say that within these symbolic reasons, psychological reasons can also be recognized.

40. Ibid., 294.

41. In her book, Jay points to this contrast as the original observation and point of departure for her study of many years concerning the origins and dynamics of blood sacrifice (Throughout Your Generations, ix–x).
against internal or external transgressions. By guarding the imaginary boundaries of its social body and keeping everything in its place, a culture maintains the purity of that social body. The increase of attention towards the purity and integrity of the physical body reflects the need for a reliable, stable community. Under such conditions, physical or symbolic transgressions of the ideal of body control (such as sexual disorder or, nowadays, being fat) are regarded as impure and require the transgressor to take up extra endeavors to restore purity.42

To comprehend the central function of blood sacrifice in patrilineal organized kinship structures, Jay locates the second explanation in “the formal logical structure of the sacrifice itself.”43 She distinguishes between the two most common modes of blood sacrifice, communion sacrifice (in which, for example, a part of the sacrificial animal is collectively eaten) and expiatory sacrifice:

Communion sacrifice unites worshippers in one moral community and at the same time differentiates that community from the rest of the world. Expiatory sacrifice integrates by getting rid of countless different moral and organic undesirable conditions: sin, disease, famine, spirit possession, social discord, blood guilt, incest, impurity of descent, pollution of childbirth, and so on, all having in common only that they must be expiated.44

In this way, the participants are united, becoming members of one social body, and concurrently they are shielded from everything that could be a threat to that body. Among these threats, the (image of) blood connected with female reproductive power often counts as a severe one. The participants in sacrifice become members of the true community, the community constituted in and through the “better” blood:

Sacrificially constituted descent, incorporating women’s mortal children into an “eternal” (enduring through generations) kin group, in which membership is recognized by sacrificial ritual, not merely by

43. Jay, “Sacrifice as Remedy,” 294. In her book, Jay develops this explanation in more detail—in both a theoretical manner (Throughout Your Generations, ch. 2) and as it applies to different sacrificial cultures, including post-Vatican II Roman Catholic culture (ch. 8).
birth, enables a patrilineal descent group to transcend mortality in the same process in which it transcends birth. In this sense, sacrifice is doubly a remedy for having been born of woman.45

A similar process of transcending both normal birth and mortality was represented in the two rituals of rebirth I described earlier: baptism and the rite of churching, taken as a renewed dedication of new mothers to the church. These rituals of rebirth could only be performed by the priest, whose supreme sacramental power consists in his exclusive right to execute the holy sacrifice of the mass.

**Julia Kristeva: Abjection and the Repression of the Maternal Body**

In her studies on the function of blood sacrifice, Jay does not elaborate on psychological motives, at least not explicitly. An author who did pay extensive attention to the possible psychological backgrounds of the shudder or “abjection” provoked by the blood of women is the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, Kristeva associates the repugnance to the blood of menstruation and lochia with the aversion towards everything that recalls the earliest, vague but overall sensory experiences acquired in connection with the maternal body. According to Kristeva, the constitution of a separate, personal identity, and especially of one’s identity as a *man*—women are supposed to identify themselves more easily with the maternal body—presupposes a partial repression of the propensity to surrender to this total sensory experience. All sensations or persons that recall the experiences of fusion associated with the maternal body will evoke defense because they pose a threat to self-consciousness and to the capacity to distinguish oneself as a separate and unique individual. Everything that reminds us of our symbiotic relation to the maternal body—immediate physical closeness but also the blood of birth and menstruation—evokes “abjection,” that is, according to Kristeva, “that state of uncertainty between subject and object that consciousness conceives as abject—state of uncertainty regarding the identity of the self and the other.”46

46. Julia Kristeva, “Pouvoirs de l'horreur” *Tel Quel*. 86 (1980): 50. For a detailed presentation of Kristeva’s concepts of “abjection” and the repression of the maternal body, notably in Judaism and Christianity, see Grietje Dresen, “Einde van de inquisitie, geboorte van een ander. Verhalen van de liefde in een voorstel tot ethiek,” *Tê Elsfer*
I consider Kristeva's psychoanalytic interpretation of the repressed maternal body as an explanation of the defense mechanism that can be activated through experiences of fusion or loss of self, but I wonder whether it also applies to the shuddering caused by the confrontation with female blood. In the earliest phase of life, in which the child has yet to become aware of its separate being and feels finest in close physical contact with the maternal body, the child has no consciousness of the fact that this body is that of a woman, let alone that this body bleeds during menstruation and after childbirth. The later separation from the mother will certainly be coupled with aggression and abjection, and this aggression will often serve as a personal incentive to control female sexuality, notably female reproductive abilities, in a patrilineal society (cf. Raab). However, the specific revulsion provoked by female blood appears to be, not a direct residue of infancy, but rather a later combination of defensive reactions against experiences recalling the maternal body; it also involves the urge to control that dangerous capacity women have—their power over reproduction—to which their "bleeding without dying" testifies (cf. J. Delaney). Kristeva, though, is not only interested in psychological motivations; she also considers the repression of the maternal body from the perspective of its social function and its significance for patrilineal kinship structure, that is, for the creation of a genealogy from father to son and a community centered around the word of the Father.47

Reconsidering the Rite of Churching

Jay's study interrelates the taboo connected with the blood loss of women and the function of sacrifice within kinship structure. This broadening of the perspective (compared with studies that only consider menstruation taboos and rules concerning impurity) is informative with regard to the question I formulated as a guide for this chapter, the question concerning the origins of the remarkable, gendered contrast between honorable and dishonorable contact with blood in certain cultures. As an example


of such a contrast, I focused on the sacrifice of the mass in Roman Catholic tradition and its connection with the ritual of churching and the general restrictions that regulate the way in which Roman Catholic women can approach the holy.  

Jay’s studies have thus another focus than studies that seek to interpret menstruation taboos. Jay’s point of departure is the central role of blood sacrifice in (precapitalistic) patrilineal societies. She interprets the rules regarding female blood loss in the perspective of the function of blood sacrifice. It would be interesting to broaden her analysis to include other cultures such as the Islamic, in which a similar sharp distinction is found between the purity required for participation in blood sacrifice and the impurity of female blood.

Of the explanations that Jay offers to account specifically for the crucial role of sacrifice (and not some other ritual), the first, “symbolic,” explanation appears to me to be the most convincing and elucidatory. In a society based on patrilineal kinship structure, the apparent descent from natural mothers must be exceeded, and symbolic fatherhood and a social order of fatherly descent must be sealed with a deed at least as decisive, unmistakable, and irrevocable as a woman’s capacity to give life (to which the female blood testifies). In various cultures that otherwise have little in common, this decisive deed was found in the taking of life, in the intentional and ritualized shedding of blood in blood-sacrifice. Fertile women, and especially women losing blood, were excluded as much as possible from attendance at the ritual of blood-sacrifice, the purpose of which was to seal the bonds between the members of the patrilineal group, mutually and in relation to the ancestors, and to dissociate these bonds from the blood of the female cycle.

The second account that Jay offers as an explanation of blood-sacrifice, localized in the unifying structure of the ritual, clarifies the inner

48. See Johnson, this volume.
49. Jay does not elaborate on Islamic sacrifice (a relevant reference though is found in Jay, Throughout Your Generations, 149). For a precious anthropological case study and interpretation of the contrast between the impurity of menstruation blood and the holiness of sacrificial blood in Islamic cult, see Carol Delaney’s interesting article “Mortal Flow: Menstruation in Turkish Village Society,” in Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation (ed. Th. Buckley and A. Gottlieb; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Her conclusions are strongly similar to those of Jay, although she presents an interesting variation of the argument of why men alone may kill: men are supposed to be the ones who give life (women provide only the substratum for the life-giving seed); therefore, men are also the only ones who may take life. The supposed monogenenerative power of semen is also the foundation of patrilineal lineage.
structure and social functioning of sacrifice, but this account is less help­ful as an answer to the question of why this function is so often fulfilled through sacrifice. At least, for me, Jay’s illuminating structural analysis gave no convincing answer to the question of why this dual function of both communion and expiation could not be fulfilled by some other ritual in which the shedding of blood plays a less prominent role. In her latest book, however, Jay elaborates quite extensively on this structuralist interpretation.50 The rituals I mentioned at the beginning of this essay though, churching and baptism, appear to fulfill a comparable function (of both communion and exclusion from evil) and can certainly be seen as examples of “birth done better.”51 The specific power of priests to perform these (and similar) varieties of ritual rebirth in the Roman Catholic tradition ultimately goes back to the role of the priest in the holy sacrifice of the mass, in which Christ’s offering is remembered and the Christian is reborn as a member of the body of Christ.

If we trace the origins of the aforementioned ambivalent appreciation of blood back to the need of a patrilineal society to “forget” the natural mother (to summarize it shortly and simply), many questions remain. One of these questions is, of course, why patrilineal organization of kin­ship is so widespread, given the fact that motherly lineage is so much more reliable. I do not venture here to answer this grand question, but anyone who so ventures must not underestimate (as Kristeva sometimes does) the role of psychological motives—envy of the role of women in reproduction, for example, or the psychic consequences of the necessity of separating oneself from the maternal body. But neither should the role of psychological motives be underestimated or tabooed, as is the case with many anthropologists (for fear of projecting Western categories). The hermeneutical problems concerning the recognition and assessment of sacrificial rituals

50. Jay brings this explanation from the “formal logical structure of sacrifice” even more to the foreground in her book. Other psychologically oriented authors inspired by Jay’s theses have attempted to develop her “symbolic” explanation in more detail (Beers, using the psychoanalytic concepts of Melanie Klein and Heinz Kohut, among others) or have attempted to psychologize her structuralist-anthropological explanation (as does Kelley Ann Raab, in “Nancy Jay and a Feminist Psychology of Sacrifice,” JFSR 13 [1997]: 75–89). Raab interprets “the unifying logic of sacrifice as communion and expiation outlined by Jay” as a rite expressing the infant–mother differentiation process as a way of “separating from the mother while still remaining connected to her in some sense” (“Nancy Jay,” 86). Yet this psychological interpretation does not answer the question of why just sacrifice (and not another ritual) more convincingly than Jay does.

51. In her book, Jay does not use this concise summary of her original thesis very often, due to her change in perspective, but it is still used in the foreword (by Karen E. Fields; p. xiii) and, for example, in Jay’s introduction (p. xxiv).
of psychological motives in another time and culture will not be solved by denying those motives altogether.\(^{52}\)

With regard to the Roman Catholic tradition, the question remains how the Roman Catholic Church manages to hold up to its premodern roots—witness the emphasis on the sacrificial character of the Eucharist, on priestly celibacy, and on the unsuitability of women for the office of priesthood—while at the same time preserving its worldwide claims of representing universality and eternity. Although this achievement is aided by the universality of “forgetting” motherly descent and by the agelong experience of the church in ritually designing symbolic fatherhood, it may not last forever. The nonordination of women is no longer taken for granted, and debates on celibacy as an obligation for priests increase, as do even more subtle arguments over hierarchical/apostolic succession and the exclusive sacramental power of the clergy. In the Netherlands, at least, the Eucharist is celebrated more and more frequently within an ecumenical service, with nonordained pastors as celebrants and with variations of the traditionally unchangeable words and acts during consecration and Communion.\(^{53}\) Ruether’s suggestion, though, that the mere presence of women in the Christian “sacred spaces” would change the symbolic and psychic dynamics of relationship to the holy must remain a suggestion. Within the Roman Catholic spaces, at least, there is little room for a trial. The experiences of female ministers in the Anglican and Protestant churches, however, do not quite support her suggestion.

In the meantime many people—men and women, within or without the churches—are looking for religious expressions that symbolize their growing receptivity towards the processes and cycles of nature. For instance, the Christian interpretation of the feasts of Christmas and Easter appears to be slowly giving way to the return of old, pagan origins: celebration of midwinter and the return of light at Christmas (symbolized by the green Christmas tree laden with candles) and the return

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\(^{52}\) Cf. Grietje Dresen, *Onschuldfantasieën: Offerzin en heilsverlangen in feminisme en mystiek* (Nijmegen, Netherlands: SUN, 1990). The studies of Beers and Raab are not classic examples of recognizing these hermeneutical problems and historical realities.

\(^{53}\) Yet for the Church of Rome the interpretation of the sacrifice of the mass as a recurrence of Christ’s offering and the incompatibility of that sacrifice with (the near presence of) the female body is not only of crucial importance in a theological sense but above all with regard to church politics, that is, with regard to the maintenance of ecclesiastical structure and power. Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Sacrifice and Social Maintenance: What’s at Stake in the (Non)-Ordination of Roman Catholic Women,” *Cross Currents* 45 (fall 1995): 359–67.
of new life and fertility in spring (expressed by the old custom of Easter bunnies bringing eggs and the new one of decorating with budding hazel branches). It is difficult to predict to what extent the Roman Catholic Church can give in to this turn towards a “pagan,” nature-oriented, and maybe more female-oriented type of religiosity without losing its claims to be the representative of a unique and eternal community of universal truth. But one must remember that in Roman Catholic tradition, these “pagan” elements were never quite absent.

Within feminist theology, several authors have recently discussed the history and meaning of the rite of churing.54 Though critical of the element of purification that lingered on in the shape and symbolism of the old rite (both in Roman Catholic and in Anglican tradition), they do look for a new kind of churing rite as a way to celebrate the profound life experience of giving birth within the context of a faith community. In line with the aforementioned turn towards a more nature-oriented and woman-friendly kind of religiosity, they would welcome a newly styled ritual to celebrate the life event of giving birth. Such a new ritual should not only include elements of thanksgiving (elements that both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church did not completely neglect, unrecognizable as they often were) but should also be a festive, social event to mark the end of a rather isolated period.55 Above all, a celebration like this could be part of the various ways in which women and men search for a transformation of worship, of symbolizing their relationship to the holy.56 “I understand the history and development of the rite of Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, commonly called the Churing of Women as a starting point for taking the debate about feminist liturgical theology beyond the issue of inclusive language to incorporating women’s occasions into the liturgical life of the whole community,” argues Natalie Knödel, speaking from the Anglican tradition.57 Women themselves should play a central part in these transformations, all the more so with regard to the rite of churing, which traditionally conveyed the church’s view of women as being unsuitable for mediating the most sacred. Whether a new rite to celebrate the process of childbirth and new parenthood is viable from the perspective of both the women and the men involved, as well as from that of the churches, is an open question. At least in the Netherlands, the processes

of secularization and individualization (or individual searching for religious meaning), on the one hand, and Roman Catholic rigorism, on the other, do not create a favorable climate for the development of such a rite. Perhaps new forms will develop from the context of the parishes, provided women can actively represent what they experience to be holy and wholesome.