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"Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee": Sexual Politics and Protestant Pieties

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In Christian writing on sexuality it is conventional to open lamenting the absence or sparseness of theology in the area up until the present, and then celebrating the emerging theologies of sexuality and of the body which the late twentieth century has made possible (e.g., Pittenger 1972:8; Terrien 1985:4; Cahill 1985:2-4). Just as Foucault's Victorians found it necessary to produce endless discourse elaborating their sexual repression (1984:17-35), so quantities of Christian ink lament the churches' silence on sexuality.

This paper questions some dimensions of this assumption. Christian piety and tradition, rather than stifling all attempts at discourse concerning sexuality, are replete with complex theological signification about sex.[1] Further, I will suggest that to fall for the assumption about Christian silence on sexuality is to make a mistake with serious consequences. What is interesting about this signification is not that it is lacking but that it is in disguise. In this paper I will look particularly at pieces of Christian popular discourse – not formal theology but at pieces of liturgical text and hymnody to which practising worshippers have regular

and repeated access. I will suggest that these texts are full of sexual signification passing itself off as other kinds of signification, and that the nature of the disguise enables a message to be conveyed which is more audible to some than to others, and which when heard carries a message which is politically and theologically loaded. The disguise works because those to whom the message is addressed are not those who control the public interpretation of meaning in Christian discourse: consequently it is possible to send the message while denying that there is any more to the disguised form than immediately meets the eye.

The consequences of this disguised signification matter because Christian discourse, like any other discourse, exists and makes sense (as Wittgenstein pointed out) in an economy of social interactions; and these interactions (as Foucault pointed out) take place in a social landscape which is mapped according to a pattern of power relations out of which some do better than others. The first task of this paper is to consider some of the "social terrain" within which Christian signification about sexuality takes place. After that I will explore some pieces of Christian liturgical and popular devotional text and make some suggestions about what is going on in them to convey messages about sexuality dressed up as something else. I will do this both by exploring these texts alone and by comparing them with other kinds of popular discourse which convey more explicit sexual content.

Sex in the Sanctuary

Amid the public glee following the sexual fall from grace of Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart and others, less electronically arresting Christian churches found themselves in no position to throw stones. Media reports in Australia and overseas have explored the issue of sexual abuse within the church from the point of view of almost every denomination.[2] As well, a body of scholarly literature has begun to develop around this set of revelations,[3] and although the issue has currently achieved topicality, church records indicate a clear pattern of abuse through Christian history.[4]

This history of abuse forms one significant although frequently unspoken dimension of the social terrain upon which Christian discourse concerning sexuality is spoken. It is also, given what we know about the reflexivity of language and social life (e.g., Halliday 1978) a dimension to which we should expect to find the spoken discourse contributing. What is it about Christian ways of thinking and talking about sex, power and religion which facilitates the construction of a tradition in which the physical abuse of women and children by clergy is a consistent, al-

beit unspoken pattern? And how, in turn, might we expect that pattern to have contributed to our discourse?

The "social terrain" of clerical abuse points to another issue in relation to the concealed Christian discourses concerning sexuality. As well as the specifically abusive elements of the Christian churches' sexual history, there is a question about the more general nature of religio-sexual systems of meaning. Morey and others observe that the fervour of religious revival and the passion of ecstatic religious experience contains or can be confused with elements of sexual passion. Considerable attention has been paid to these dynamics in patristic and medieval mysticism (e.g., Armstrong 1986:170-249; Bynum 1991). However, the prevalence of sexual incursions into pastoral relationships in many denominations – and not only those which have an emphasis on emotionally charged or ecstatic practices – suggests that there is some more pervasive relationship between religious and sexual experience – at least in western Christianity – than is commonly recognised.

Armstrong, Morey, and Stange each offer an account of a particular set of religious and sexual discourses in relation to historically situated and culturally specific Christian religious movements. Each offers a way into considering the complex nature of these intersecting patterns of belief and behaviour. While the specificity of each account is necessary to its approach, I contend that by limiting the analysis to such extreme or overt instances there is an attendant risk is that we may too quickly skip to seeing the nexus between power, sexuality and religious enthusiasm as an aberrant or extraordinary element of Christian belief and practice. Work like that of Poling, Fortune, and Brown and Bohn demonstrates the need for analysis of the dynamics which exist not only in the fathers' deserts, in medieval cloisters, in the charged atmosphere of a nineteenth-century revival or above the footlights of a televangelical floorshow. Diverse as they are, these settings share a capacity to be exoticised, distanced from the contemporary reader by specificity of time, location and sectarian slant, so that the abuses associated with each can be seen as marginal to some perceived mainstream of Christian belief and practice. The pervasiveness of sexual abuse in diverse Christian settings suggests that there is a need to understand what Morey (1990:87) calls the "congruence of religious and sexual energy" as being diffused through a great variety of Christian belief and practice. This "congruence of energies" then forms another element of the social terrain upon which Christian meaning about sexuality takes place.

The incursion of sexual abuse into professional relationships is not uncommon – doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, counsellors and other pro-

fessions recognise it as a serious problem, often attended by dynamics which make it difficult for the victim to recognise what has happened as abusive until well after the event. The incubus-like quality of this violation, as something which occurs at some level beyond the victim's own immediate experience, is common in situations of abuse (Rutter 1990:184-186); I suggest that in settings where the dominant discursive formation is religious, the concealment takes on a specific identity.

I will address this by considering the idea of submission and loss of identity against the broader frame of popular and formal Christian piety and theology. Specifically, I will consider the interaction of metaphors of military conquest and of explicitly sexual conquest in a few instances of widespread belief and liturgical practice. This system of exclusions is not limited to language (which can be changed at least superficially by a fairly straightforward set of substitutions) but is encoded into some of the most fundamental systems of theological meaning-making out of which Christian discourses achieve their identity.

Sex in the Liturgy

If the examples cited by Morey, Stange and Armstrong are "exoticisable", so is the text I have chosen as paradigmatic for the point I want to make. However, it raises in a startling and confronting way connections which can then be traced as more subtly permeating a great deal of "mainstream" Christian discourse.

As an Anglican priest John Donne was well-placed to articulate the theological preoccupations of his own day. He wrote (1972 [1633]:85-86):

> Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for, you
> As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
> Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
> I, like an usurpt towne to another due,
> Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
> Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
> But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue,
> Yet dearely I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
> But am betroth'd unto your enemie,
> Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,
> Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
> Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

To address this and the following pieces of text, I draw on work relating to reading and speaking positions. Gunther Kress (1985)[5] points out

that written texts position the reader in relation to the text by constructing a "reading position" (1985:37-38). Kress continues,

> Readers need not comply with the demands of a reading position constructed for them. The options range from not being the reader at all, to a distanced, critical reading, where the reader refuses to enter the reading position constructed in the text and thereby reconstructs the text in a significantly different form in reading it (1985:40).

Another way of failing to comply with the implied reading position is simply by not being the kind of reader whom the text constructs. The reading "self" becomes split into the "I" who does the reading (from the position allowed by the text, acquiescing in the text's coercion) and the "I" of the reader's lived experience, who may have little in common with the text's constructed reader. This disjunction in the subjectivity of the reader occurs for example when a female reader encounters a text which assumes a male reader. The rupture between the text's assumed "I" and the "I" of lived experience means that while the reader may successfully "take on" the text's constructed reading position, the disjunction between the two is always present and ready to intrude into the reading.

Kress continues,

> The task of the writer is to construct a text which will effectively coerce the reader into accepting the constructed text. To do this, the text should seem natural and plausible, uncontentious – from the reader's point of view – and obvious (1985:40).

A position which challenges the "naturalness" of the position assumed by the text, whether by intentional distancing or by just failing to fit the assumed position, can be referred to as "marked". By contrast, one which accepts and fits in with the "natural" or "obvious" nature of the reading position which the text imposes can be called "unmarked".

An unmarked position, then, is most likely to be one which is culturally dominant; readings which contest that dominance from marginalised perspectives – such as gay, female or ethnic minority – generate a disjunction between the reader constructed by the text and the active reader and so are marked.

I will argue that a large part of the sexual content of Christian piety and teaching, while pervasive, is written from an unmarked speaking position of male heterosexuality. Adopting a consistently masculine reading position which assumes that all believers – men and women – will fit into it produces a text which recognises no sexual specificity (cf. Nelson 1988:18). Sexual images lose their meaning because while the dominant metaphor

is one drawn from male (heterosexual) sexual experience, there is no "female" to which it can refer and so sexual metaphors become (apparently) emptied of reference. This use of sexual metaphor divorced from sexual meaning becomes a part of the texts' world-view which is constructed as being "natural and plausible, uncontentious ... and obvious".

Approaching such texts from the marked position of a female reader means that the "other" of the sexual metaphor is reinstated, and the merging of sexual and non-sexual reference systems is challenged. It becomes possible to see the previously disguised sexual content of a considerable amount of Christian theological and liturgical discourse.

Further, it becomes possible to identify themes which emerge when such texts are interrogated from a female reading position. The argument is not just that a great deal of Christian liturgy and theology contains sexual references, but that the discourses which emerge are about particular kinds of sex and not others. In particular, the theme of submission and passivity, which does not carry strong sexual meanings from the unmarked position of male sexuality, emerges as a discourse of significant – and ambivalent – eroticism from a female reading position. To illustrate this point I will consider several pieces of liturgical text and compare them with the deployment of comparable metaphors in another genre of writing which is also significant in constructing the world of feminine sexual experience, namely, romantic fiction.

The significance of the Donne sonnet is that by its confrontational expression it alerts us to the intermeshing of the sexual, military and transformative metaphors which run through other texts in a less explicit form. From the unmarked reading position of male sexuality, the texts are freed of their sexual overtones, even when the dominant metaphor is explicitly sexual, because the sexuality referred to is feminine.

When Donne writes of the spiritual life as chastity which can never be achieved except by the rape of the believer, he gives his text its power by linking it to a number of different sexual themes. One is the idea of rape as something desirable. At one level this is an instance of the intentional paradox which characterises the work of the "metaphysical" poets and of Donne in particular. However, the intellectual game does not alone account for the confronting power of the image. At a second level, the metaphor alludes to the male fantasy that rape is something women desire and which is a necessary rite of passage into adult sexuality. This idea, common in the soft and hard porn of contemporary fiction, is not new. A century and a half after Donne wrote, it provided the sexual and literary tension for Mr B's tortuous pursuit of Pamela through four hundred and fifty two pages (Richardson 1962 [1740]).

This, too, was Vaughan Slater's perception as he discovered the wakening desire of Carolyn in an attempted rape in Miranda Lee's *A Daughter's Dilemma*:

> "Don't," she sobbed. "Just don't ..." And she rolled away from him and drew her legs up into a tight little ball of misery.
>
> "I won't," he assured her, his voice bleak. "Believe me, I won't. I ... I don't know what came over me. I've never acted like that with a woman in my whole life."
>
> Because you've never needed to, Carolyn thought wretchedly as she lay there, curled up in the foetal position. There's never been a woman who's said no to you. And if I stay here with you now, there never will be. For even his brutal kiss had aroused her unbearably, had left her aching for him (Lee 1992: 90-92).

In the Donne sonnet, the male worshipper takes on the supposed abandoned desire of the female rape victim. In his inversion of sex roles, the image takes on a third dimension of paradoxical complexity; after all, the experience of rape is one which Donne, parliamentarian, adventurer, judge and later Dean of St Paul's was presumably unlikely ever to experience. The adoption by a male author's narratorial voice of the feminine role in a spiritualised rape fantasy points to the fictitious nature of the threat implied in the lexical choice "ravish".

This element of the paradox is summed up in Michael Rowland's remark, "When John Donne says 'no', does he really mean 'no'?" pointing to one of the wider debates surrounding contemporary readings of Donne's poems. Terry Threadgold's location of Donne "at the founding moment of the bourgeois subject" (1986:301) suggests a broader significance for a reading of the religious metaphors in his work, since these too can be understood as reflecting the "founding" of the modern religious subject – the unitary (male) individual relating to the transcendent, strictly monotheistic (masculine) God of classical theism.[6] In "Batter my heart", Donne's narratorial voice does indeed reflect Threadgold's concept of split subjectivity[7] in which "[t]he 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is spoken about can never really be the same" (1986:299). In this sonnet, that is, the speaking "I" requests and desires treatment which to the spoken-of "I" is a feared violation.

With the development of the unified, bourgeois male subject, this split subjectivity becomes a feature of women's language and thought, in the effort to incorporate the male gaze as a determinant of female experience and existence. This ambivalence of the split subject, in which one part of the "I" desires what the other part fears, becomes a central theme in female eroticism. I am suggesting that it is also of central importance

in the way in which a female reader/worshipper encounters a religious text written from the unified standpoint of the modern, male subject. Consequently the image of rape, confronting and frightening from a feminine reading position, becomes in Donne's hands a safe and witty vehicle by which to convey the multilayered paradox of a soul which both longs to be possessed by God but also feels trapped by "thine enemie". At the same time, the titillating deployment of the rape theme in popular fiction aimed at a female readership indicates that even for female readers the image is not an exclusively threatening one: it has the capacity to be displaced into a fictional world in which it becomes a vehicle for the expression of desire.

This is borne out more formally by studies of sexual fantasy: Katchadourian and Lunde (1980:281) cite Bryne (1977) listing "being forced to have sex" as a subject of fantasy "reported more often by females than by males" and follow Masters and Johnson (1979) in citing "forced sexual encounters" as the most common fantasy of heterosexual females (1980:284). The violence of "forced sexual encounters" means something different in fantasy from in reality – the intention involved in fantasising suggests that the element of "force" takes on a metaphorical meaning. That is, you choose to have a fantasy about having no choice. Sources from popular culture bridge the gap into real life, however, where the eroticism of actual practices can reside in their very ambiguity (e.g., Arndt 1993). More formally, Denise Thompson emphasises the need not to lose sight of the political nature and manipulation of desire, but suggests that the imposition of a new feminist puritanism is not likely to achieve this:

> Instead, I would argue, the problematic of sexuality could be more usefully elucidated by asking questions about the meaning and purpose of various forms of sexual desire, about how that desire is constituted within the context of a phallocentric social order, a context which is not always "dangerous" but which generates "pleasure" too. We need to ask questions about what choices and responsibilities we have, given that sexual desire is not experienced as "chosen" in any rational, conscious, deliberate sense (1991:209).[8]

I suggest that the liturgical and theological use of rape imagery has, from a reading position informed by the pleasures and dangers of female sexualities, a much more complex set of meanings, both negative and positive, than it has from a male reading position.

Lacking the explicit sexual reference of Donne's sonnet is a hymn post-dating Donne by two centuries. George Matheson typifies a substantial body of hymnody deploying military images when he writes:

Make me a captive, Lord,
and then I shall be free;
force me to render up my sword,
and I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life's alarms
when by myself I stand;
imprison me within thine arms,
and strong shall be my hand.

My heart is weak and poor
until it master find;
it has no spring of action sure,
it varies with the wind.
It cannot freely move,
till thou hast wrought its chain;
enslave it with thy matchless love,
and deathless it shall reign.

My will is not my own
till thou hast made it thine;
if it would reach a monarch's throne
it must its crown resign;
it only stands unbent,
amid the clashing strife,
when on thy bosom it has leant
and found in thee its life.

Australian Hymn Book 528

This hymn does not mention any specifically sexual images – as long, that is, as we assume that the singer is a man. From the unmarked reading position of masculine sexuality, this hymn is a clever and also moving account of the self abandoning itself to the divine. From the marked reading position of feminine sexuality, I suggest that its messages are sexually complex and explicit, containing elaborate intertextual reference to produce (from a feminine reading position) an erotically charged text. However, the very nature of the masculine position as "unmarked" ("natural", "obvious") means that a female singer is effectively erased and the sexual meaning remains implicit. I shall draw out three aspects of this sexual intertext.

First, a feminine reading position cannot easily separate military and sexual conquest. Coverage of the Bosnian crisis, and emerging accounts of Korean women drafted as "comfort girls" during the Second World

War are two examples of the real-life congruence of military and sexual conquest. Rape is a common tool of subjugation of conquered peoples through their women; for women of conquered peoples, rape is an added terror. The explicit association of sexual conquest with military conquest is well documented (e.g., Lloyd 1986:63-76). Women know that military imagery carries an intrinsic dimension of sexual domination which is not present when the text is encountered from a masculine reading position.

The second aspect of this hymn which changes its meaning when read from the standpoint of feminine sexuality is its theme of bondage. The contrasting images of bondage ("till thou hast wrought its chain", "imprison me within thine arms") and willing submission ("till on thy bosom it has leant") recall another dimension of the literary and cultural convention of a close relationship between physical and sexual conquest. Self-conscious in its intentionally reflexive treatment of this theme was Pedro Almodovar's film *Tie me up, tie me down* (1990) in which the hero ties the heroine up so they can get to know one another better. Finally she assures him – truthfully – that he no longer has to tie her up as she has lost her desire to escape in her awakened desire for him.[9] Like *Histoire d'O*, *Tie me up, tie me down* taps a relatively rare theme of heterosexual bondage in which the woman is the victim. Studies of S&M practices report difficulty finding heterosexual women who choose the "bottom" role (Weinberg and Kamel 1983:150; Stein 1974).

In the instances which these authors discuss, masochistic behaviour is embraced by men for a short time, to act out a given scene; after which they slip out of the role and return to their usual persona – often a socially and economically powerful one (Stein 1974:244, 262). Both *Histoire d'O* and *Tie me up, tie me down*, by contrast, deal with a female masochism which initially has less to do with pleasure than with restructuring of identity and reorienting of subjectivity towards a male construction. The fact that in both instances the woman comes to desire the situation is an essential element, but is internal to the setting: that is, unlike men who initiate the interaction and often pay to be dominated, the heroines of these stories only experience pleasure in their submission after the restructuring of their identities has already begun.

Sources from popular culture contradict the formal literature's impression of an absence of heterosexual female masochism. The relative mainstreaming of S&M, with the advent in Australia of Hellfire Clubs (recalling London's nineteenth-century men-only Hell Fire Club; Weinberg and Kamel 1983:138) is too recent to have received much scholarly attention. However, journalistic accounts indicate that women as well as men have entered the S&M scene, with Masterson (1993) report-

ing that the clubs have difficulty finding enough people of either sex prepared to play the role of "top", preferring the victim-role ("bottom").

However, just as reading position in the case of written texts means that the meaning of the same text changes according to the subjectivity of the reader, so too I would suggest, with Jeffreys (1993) and others, that the meaning of masochistic behaviour varies according to one's position in the actual disfribution of real power relations. A masochistic position may be a role into which one steps for a short time, deriving its significance from its difference from one's everyday power role (as with Stein's male company directors). Or it may be a playing out of real experiences of powerlessness – an argument often put forward by both the advocates and the critics of lesbian S&M (compare Jeffreys with Califia 1979).

The extreme example of S&M illustrates both the ambivalence and the mutability of the symbol of submission. In both the discourses I have been examining – of religion and of romantic fiction – submission is an important theme, involving not only submission of the will but also physical submission. The ambivalence of the symbol is that, as can be seen in fiction and in S&M, it has the potential both for anarchic, transgressive pleasure and for fearful oppression. And, like these, I would argue, the meaning of the "captivity" and "binding" of the religious subject varies depending on their positioning in real relationships of sexual and social power.

The parallels between romantic fiction, S&M and at least some liturgical and theological discourse are striking. Heroines of romantic fiction are forever being "imprisoned within [the hero's] arms", and it invariably is just what they need. Delia, the heroine of Elda Minger's *Seize the Fire* is not unlike Matheson's hymnodic "I", in that her will is not her own, leading her to follow an obsessive vision over which she has little conscious control. Fortunately, her recalcitrant will is taken over by Morgan Buckmaster in time to save her from anything worse than a humiliatingly public breakdown and hospitalisation:

> He grabbed her, wrested her hand from the doorknob, and half dragged, half carried, her to the bed. Sitting her down, he kept his fingers entwined with hers as he forced her hands up over her head. He put his face against hers, his cheek against her hot skin. "I can't stand back and be a party to this. Delia, you're sick. You're in no condition to go tonight. Call it off" (Minger 1985:233).

With the themes of war and bondage in Matheson's hymn goes a third, the loss of self and of identity. Accounts of male sexuality (e.g., Hite 1981:330-331) suggest that this sense of dissolution of the boundaries of self and the experience of submerging the self into the other is a

characteristic of the male experience of orgasm. The loss of individual subjectivity, tied in Matheson's hymn to the dominant military metaphor, is one which from a masculine reading position suggests temporary and ecstatic loss. This is a well-established theme in Christian spiritual traditions which emphasise *kenosis*, the emptying of the self.

From a masculine reading position, there is no necessary link between the two themes of physical submission and loss of identity; so these two ideas function as independent metaphors joined by the common content of spiritual immersion in the divine. From a feminine reading position, the confluence of the two metaphors has a more confronting significance. The idea of loss of oneself in the other is a central theme of the dominant western construction of female eroticism, which can again be illustrated from the discourses of romantic fiction. In a blend of spiritual and erotic imagery, this theme proves pivotal in *Wuthering Heights* when Catherine declares,

> I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here? ... If all else perished, and *he* remained, *I* should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it ... Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! (Emily Brontë 1963 [1847]:83-84).

Here, the metaphor is not a violent one, but illustrates the link between spiritual and sexual conceptions of immersion of the self into the other. Just as a feminine reading of military metaphors implies intertextual reference to rape, so too the Brontë extract illustrates the sexual overtones which are essentially linked to the idea of loss of self and of personal boundaries when read from a feminine reading position. Catherine is speaking not of the temporary blurring of boundaries associated with male orgasm, but a permanent blending of self into the desired other, which threatens to swamp her capacity for independent existence.

The submersion of subjectivity and loss of identity is a pervasive theme in Christian discourse. Lacking the military imagery of Matheson's hymn is the prayer prayed by Methodists (and, in Australia, their Uniting Church successors) as part of the annual Covenant service:

> I am no longer my own, but yours.
> Put me to what you will,
> rank me with whom you will;
> put me to doing, put me to suffering;
> let me be employed for you or laid aside for you;

exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty;
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure
and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours, to the glory and praise of your name.
Amen.

Uniting in Worship 50

Recalling Donne as well as Matheson, Daniel Iverson's "Spirit of the Living God" enjoins

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me ...
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Scripture in Song Book 2, no. 303

This song is particularly intriguing because from an unmarked reading position – of male heterosexuality – it appears to have no sexual content whatever. From a female reading position, however, "Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me" sounds like a request which would once have invoked the full wrath of the obscenity laws. More fringe in its intertextual references is Howard Carter's

I give myself to thee as a living sacrifice, ...
Bind me to the altar with the cords of Thy pure love.
Let Thy grace enable me to stand.
I yield my heart and mind to Thee, O Lord, my God,
and pray Thy life in mine be glorified.

Scripture in Song Book 2, no. 325

One could go on citing such examples almost endlessly, but there is a point to be made. Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972:21-23), elaborated the difficulties of assigning boundaries to bodies of knowledge. He saw it as more productive to speak of intersecting discourses which interact with one another in different configurations to produce variable sets of meanings (1972:38). I find this a particularly useful concept for addressing the intersecting discourses of sex, power and religion. They are not, as Christian history has tried to make them, discrete content areas. The language of sex suffuses religious discourse (just as

religious metaphors suffuse sexual expression) and the language of power transforms both.

Donne's three metaphors – of transformation of identity, of sexual conquest and of military conquest – run together and separately through a great deal of both popular and formal Christian discourse. I suggest that these metaphors, read from the point of view of a masculine (unmarked) reading position, constitute relatively discrete discourses, each encoding a different kind of meaning related to spiritual experience. By contrast, from a marked reading position of female sexuality, these metaphorical systems run together to form one fairly seamless discourse of which the dominant meaning is sexual even when the primary metaphor is not.

At the same time, these discourses are not identical. Not all religious language is an elaborately encoded text for female submission; nor am I suggesting that female worshippers are masochists. Rather, I am pointing to some structural patterns in contemporary Christian discourse which emerge from the multifarious intersections of these various discursive formations related to theology, liturgy, sex and power. Religious discourse is not static; for example, it will be interesting to see how these dynamics change as ever-increasing numbers of women enter the ordained ministry of major denominations. I suspect the discursive practices and symbolising processes of generations cannot be so easily abandoned however.

Practice: Sex in the Eucharist

If you are male and heterosexual, there is only one activity for which you kneel down in front of another man, his crotch close enough to touch, in an atmosphere of dim light and soft music, while something is placed in your mouth. If you are female and heterosexual, there are potentially two. The sexual overtones to the act of kneeling are never explicit in a liturgical context; but once seen they are hard to ignore.

Writing that, I wondered whether I had overstepped academic caution. Could I, in examining the thoroughly polysemic act of kneeling, have allowed too harsh a reading? I stopped to ponder the question. It was a weekend, and as usual when working on weekends (in a demountable at the deserted end of campus, by the river), I had brought my dog for company. So we stepped out, and Polly, catching a sudden whiff, scuttled under the building. I bent to call her out, and, doing so, heard a male voice from the farther bank of the river, calling something incoherent. I looked around, but, seeing no one, knelt down and continued calling Polly out from under the building. As I knelt the invisible observer shouted again, unmistakably: "Are you down on your knees

for me?" If this coincidental experience is a reliable indicator, I am not out of order in the way in which I have construed the symbolic associations around the act of kneeling by a woman, in real or imagined space "in front of" a man.

The symbolic associations of kneeling do not exhaust the ambivalent meanings of the eucharist from a feminine reading position. At the heart of the celebration is the symbolism of mealtimes (e.g., Symons 1990), socio-sexual dimensions of which include both maintaining community and the act of eating (see, for example, Wolf 1990; Orbach 1979; 1986; Coward 1984). The analysis of specific intersections between discursive formations related to sex and power in religious discourse can elucidate some of the more hidden meanings which emerge in an examination of female reading positions in western Christianity.[10]

Denise Thompson (1991) criticises the claim in some contemporary feminist and queer theory that sexual transgression is revolutionary regardless of the form it takes. She argues that fringe practices like S&M reproduce patriarchal relations "[by] eroticising and acting out an iconography of oppression" (1991:228). It would be tempting but misleading to make a parallel point about the religious use of violent sexual imagery. The erasure of a feminine reading position in Christian religious texts means that the violence implied is at once eroticised and de-eroticised; hiddenness functions both to conceal and to render secret and therefore more seductive. The use of images of violent sexual conquest in liturgical texts could also be read as sacralising an iconography of oppression; however, this again is too straightforward, overlooking the thoroughgoing intertextuality with which intersecting discourses of power, desire and sacredness are engaged.

This analysis has taken religion as the starting point; one could however carry out an analysis like this beginning from a range of locations. It is too simple to say that religious language "borrows" military metaphors or sexual metaphors and imbues them with a sacral aura. It is not that these things have overtones of each other which can somehow be separated out, but these intersecting discourses are all constitutive elements of the others: these discursive intersections are not incidental but essential.

The discourses of sexuality, power and religious language are neither concentric nor coterminous. They intersect in varying ways, but extend beyond one another into wider discourses of politics, sexuality and religiosity. Female identity, as reader, worshipper, thinking and acting subject, is constructed in and through whole systems of intersecting discourses and experiences.

It may or may not be possible in practice to separate out these intersections; but both possible and necessary is the task of discerning the political dimensions of devotion and desire. With the pleasure comes the danger of an "iconography of oppression". Uncovering and criticising the complex layering and structuring of sexual meaning embedded in religious discourse is one aspect of that task.

Notes

1 A note on definition is in order here. Much contemporary feminist theology looks at broadening conceptions of sexuality and power (e.g., Heyward 1989; Brock 1988) and insists that the meaning of "sex" be extended beyond "male and female reproductive/pleasure organs and their manipulation" (Heyward 1989:2), arguing that "In the lexicon of these pages, *sexual* refers to our embodied relational response to erotic/sacred power ... to speak of the erotic or of God is to speak of *power in right relation*" (1989:3). Heyward's purpose is primarily theological, whereas mine is primarily critical. Consequently, I have chosen to retain the conventional – that is, narrower – definitions of terms such as "sexual" and "erotic". Where Heyward sets out to revision theology in the light of an all-embracing understanding of erotic power as the force for life and relation, I want to consider the *narrowly* sexual meanings which are hidden in a considerable part of the historical tradition of Christian liturgy and theology.

2 Recent Australian reports have included *Compass*, ABC television, Sunday, 27 June 1993.

3 This literature focuses in three areas: pastoral and ethical concerns (e.g., Broadus 1991; Fortune 1983; Poling 1991); "breaking the silence", responding to the need to bring instances of religiously justified sexual abuse onto the public agenda (e.g., Born 1990); and a third, smaller body of literature is developing a more discursive approach to the issue of sex and power in the pastoral relationship and in Christian theology and practice in specific periods (e.g., Stange 1990; Morey 1990; Armstrong 1986).

4 For example, Laing's edition of the works of John Knox (1966:550-555); Patrick (1907:89); Saunders (1915 [1605]:20).

5 Cf. Halliday (1978).

6 For a discussion of this transition see Moltmann (1981:21-30) and Willis (1987).

7 Invoking Lacan and Kristeva.

8 Cf. Dimen (1992) and Segal (1992:123).

9 In the context of this paper it is noteworthy that although the film itself is not marked by explicit religious references, the opening credits appear over a triptych depicting one of the goriest and most masochistic items of Christian iconography, the Sacred Heart.

10 See Bynum (1991:119-159) on the dynamics of food and sexuality in the eucharistic devotion of thirteenth-century female mystics.

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