

– THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION –

The Moral Anthropology of Nature and Grace

by Gil Bailie

“To allow the truth to be obscured is invariably a cause of scandal somewhere, even if one has been tempted to prevaricate in order to avoid scandalizing this or that individual.”

Henri de Lubac

“Contrary to what our nihilists and relativists tell us, there is a human nature, and its resiliency is such that it often manages to adjust to the weirdest cultural insanities.”

René Girard

“There is only one thing that it requires real courage to say, and that is a truism.”

G. K. Chesterton

NATURAL AND UNNATURAL

When the theme of this conference was first discussed, it occurred to me that it might be the most appropriate opportunity for me to make amends for a shortcoming in my own work which I have long regretted. I did not address the morally crucial issue of abortion in *Violence Unveiled*. My reasons were, and in many ways still are, sound ones. I needn't go into them. But I regret not being more forthcoming on this issue in the past. All the more did I regret this oversight when pro-abortion arguments appeared in print with footnotes to my work. This was, it seemed to me, further evidence of a growing tendency to use Girard's thought to reinforce forms of political correctness and victimary thinking for which it was once thought to be a reliable antidote. And so, as we gathered in Innsbruck, I had begun to consider the possibility of doing something on the natural and the unnatural at this year's conference, with a special focus on the conspicuously unnatural act of elective abortion.

At the opening lecture of the Innsbruck conference, however, Professor Graham Ward delivered a rhapsody on John's Gospel that seemed to draw its inspiration more from the Gucci ad that appeared on our conference publicity than from the Fourth Gospel. In due course, the conference that began with this breathless conflation of the *homoousios* and the homoerotic concluded with René Girard's trenchant analysis of mimetic desire masquerading as erotic breathlessness in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I was left with the urge to speak up for marital bliss, or at least to credit marriage with more than just its dreary social utility and moral respectability. Perhaps, I thought, I could put a word in for the romantic experience which is, in the proper course of things, both the prelude to marriage and its abiding handmaid. As Professor

Ward's lecture unintentionally demonstrated, of course, the need to demythologize romantic illusions – like the need to deconstruct sacrificial structures – remains, but the world has changed even in the few years since this colloquium began. Today we stumble amid the wreckage of romantic illusions even as we are morally paralyzed by a simple-minded victimary ethic that fancies itself free of sacrificial thinking precisely to the degree that it sacrifices the tradition that taught us to think about victims in the first place. Instead of just hoisting romanticism on its mimetic petard, perhaps we need to ask: Did romanticism betray a truth that anti-romanticism has yet to assess and assimilate? And instead of turning to inclusion and diversity as the universal elixir, perhaps we should ask: What is being expelled by those waving the banner of inclusion?

The title of our conference is “Nature, ‘Human Nature,’ and the Mimetic Theory.” A conference which repeats the word *nature* twice in its title would seem an acceptable venue in which to raise the question of what is natural and what is not. This is especially so when, as in this case, the conferees are aware of, and ostensibly concerned with, an overall crisis of undifferentiation for which the blurring of such distinctions would be an obvious and troubling symptom. If the “disintegration of all differences that mimesis brings about” was of concern to Girard as he was writing *Things Hidden*, and if in that book he was apprehensive about “the increasingly aggravated state of undifferentiation that marks our present situation,”¹ how much more aggravated has the “disintegration of all differences” become today? Popular culture, stealing, as always, just enough of the Gospel to be both morally convincing and socially reckless, insists that our attention remain riveted on those able to assert a plausible claim to victim status, but the deeper crisis today is the “disintegration of all differences,” and it is being driven by precisely the victimary thinking that, having helped inspire, I, for one, feel an obligation to help clarify.

It is a measure of just how aggravated this crisis of distinctions has become that in order to speak today about human nature one must bracket the phrase with sneer quotes, as we have dutifully done in the title of our conference. This obligatory typographical deconstruction of human nature is an act of allegiance to the principle that nothing must any longer be allowed to thwart our desires, not human nature, not nature itself, not the facts of life, not the concrete realities of our bodies, nothing. If the difference between a woman's body and the body of the child in her womb represents a moral inconvenience, with a puff of incense from the ideological censor it will be banished. If the social difference between the marital union of a man and a

¹ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 391, 359.

woman and a homosexual relationship is regarded as an affront, it, too, will be whisked away, the testimony of the ages and the sentinel of commonsense to the contrary notwithstanding.

Returning to earth by raising the question of the natural and the unnatural is not without its dangers. Terrible crimes have been committed by people who justified their atrocities as necessary to the task of eliminating the unnatural. None of us should lower our guard with respect to such things. If I raise the question of distinction between the natural-unnatural, it is not in order to stigmatize those suffering through no fault of their own from same-sex attractions or unplanned pregnancies, but to insist on a degree of anthropological and social realism, without which we will be unlikely even to recognize the crisis of undifferentiation into we are slipping, much less address it intelligently.

Today's widespread acceptance of elective abortion is, in my view, a moral catastrophe of the first magnitude, compared with which most other social concerns pale. The matter of how people live their private lives, and in what social or sexual arrangements, on the other hand, hardly deserves to be on the public agenda at all. It is of no interest to me, and I trust it is of none to you. On the issue of homosexuality as such and on the separate issue of homosexual behavior, I am willing, as on other issues, to accede to the teaching authority of my Church. After reiterating the position held by the Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia – that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” – the Catholic Catechism appropriately cautions:

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.²

Neither the legitimate need to extend compassion, tolerance, and understanding to those with same-sex attractions, nor the entirely appropriate political principle of staying out of the personal lives of others, however, precludes a vigorous defense of marriage in the face of efforts to redefine it, efforts which will – *de facto* if not *de jure* – define it out of existence. Please believe me when I assure you that it is with the attack on traditional marriage, and *not* with homosexuality as such or even with homosexual behavior, that I am here concerned. If I raise questions about homosexuality or homosexual behavior – if, for instance, I suggest that the question as to what is natural and what unnatural is still relevant to the discussion of these things

² *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2358.

– be assured that, had the challenge to traditional marriage not been forced onto the social agenda, I would never be raising such a questions.

In keeping with our conference theme, therefore, I want to speak of protecting nature – in this case, human nature – from cultural trends increasingly contemptuous of the very concept of human nature, trends which are currently altering the social ecology and deepening the crisis of undifferentiation which it should be the business of this colloquium to analyze with candor. The word *nature* is only useful if it can be defined, and it is possible to define a word only if it has limits; that’s what the word *define* means. If there is such a thing as nature, it is because there is such a thing as the unnatural. To acquiesce in the collapse of the distinction between the natural and the unnatural is to contribute to the crisis of distinctions which it ought to be our business to explicate.

To be sure, for creatures endowed with freedom, and with what Paul Ricoeur calls an unstable ontological constitution, the determination of what is natural in the human realm must be given wide latitude, for it is the nature of human nature to be ordained to its own transcendence. Self-sacrifice and martyrdom are as unnatural as self-mutilation and suicide, but only the latter are contrary to human nature. The fact that humans are ordered to self-transcendence and that they possesses genuine freedom, writes Henri de Lubac, “does not in any sense mean that spiritual beings have no ‘nature’ or ‘essence,’ as some people are too ready to think nowadays.”³ However elusive the phrase “human nature” may be when applied to what is noblest and most selfless, its usefulness in inhibiting the descent into what is morally degrading and culturally ruinous remains, and we flout it at our peril. For a theological tradition indebted to the principle that grace perfects nature, the blurring of the distinction between the natural and the unnatural will have additional grave consequences.

THE FOG OF VICTIMARY THINKING

“The notion of rights, which was launched into the world in 1789,” wrote Simone Weil, “has proved unable, because of its intrinsic inadequacy, to fulfill the role assigned to it.”⁴ Demanding one’s rights is the single sociopolitical rite in Western societies, and it has achieved its preeminence for one simple reason: it works. The demand for rights is so politically Pavlovian that nothing seems to be able to resist it. As a result, everywhere today truth and commonsense

³ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), 114-115.

⁴ Simone Weil, “Human Personality,” *The Simone Weil Reader*, Edited by George A. Panichas, (New York: David McKay, 1981), p. 314.

are being sacrificed to victimary thinking with a moral flippancy that is sometimes breathtaking. No mature social or political debate in our society can proceed until we deconstruct this moral reflex.

The British writer, Angela West, began her fascinating book “Deadly Innocence,” with this sentence: “Sometime in the mid 1970s in Britain, women were declared innocent. All charges against them were to be dropped. Women were not guilty and never had been.” Shortly after this blanket amnesty was granted, Ms. West notes, it was used to exempt from moral scrutiny acts of sterile, surgical violence whose victims are as weak, powerless, and voiceless as it is humanly possible to be. This same bestowal of moral privilege on those who have been victimized – or, more broadly, those of the same gender, race, class or sexual orientation as the victims – is at work today in many areas of our cultural life, with comparable, if usually less lethal, consequences. We must never tire of defending victims, but issuing them moral trump cards with no expiration date isn’t fair to them; it is a morally reckless recipe for more victimization.

To make matters worse, the most resilient and adaptive of the liberationist ideologies of late modernity was that which endowed its sexual revolutions with rationale. To the general modern assumption that freedom means freedom from all constraint, the sexual liberationist emphatically adds contempt for moral restraints concerning sexuality, upon which earlier societies relied for order and social peace and moral coherence. If the victimary ideologies have a wide appeal, and if the sexual liberationist slogans are especially intoxicating, the combined power of the sexual mythology and victimary ethics has proven to be morally hypnotic and politically paralyzing. This ideological brew consisting of naïve notions of sexual liberation mixed with claims to victim status on the part of the sexually liberated is systematically expelling the Judeo-Christian moral tradition from public life. In the face of this ideological juggernaut, the accumulated testimony of rationality, morality, anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, and biology are as nothing.

We live in what very well may be the most sexually confused culture in the history of the world. Those who, on the basis of the last thirty years of experience, presume to make virtually irreversible alterations in our culture’s moral, social, and legal landscape can hardly be said to be making a modest proposal, except in the Swiftian sense. And yet, to utter the merest objection to these proposals is to be accused of being in alliance with the low and the vulgar, the know-nothing right-wing radio talk-show hosts. As Sergei Averintsev has observed: in our day “sinners

and harlots are themselves more sanctimonious than the most sanctimonious of prudes, more pharisaical than any Pharisee.”⁵ Once the pro-abortion forces were able to identify abortion as a right whose abrogation would be incommensurate with the rectification of historical injustices against women, every moral reservation uttered about abortion could be dismissed as a heartless and mean-spirited plot to force women back into social subservience. Similarly, having fought successfully to have homosexuality removed from the list of psychological disorders and accorded legal recognition, those promoting its complete cultural canonization have managed by indirection to transfer the moral onus once associated with homosexual behavior to “homophobia,” a term shorn of its scientific meaning and used to silence anyone with the temerity to exhibit the slightest moral discomfort or societal misgivings about the dismantling of marriage. Real homophobia exists, and it is to be emphatically repudiated, but opposition to the social and political agenda of the homosexual activists cannot be automatically conflated with it without depreciating the real meaning of the term.

As strongly as I feel about the issues I want to raise here, however, and as candidly as I will express myself, I am perfectly aware that the painful choices facing pregnant mothers, on one hand, and those with same-sex attractions, on the other, are very real. For my part, I want to challenge the prevailing assumption that the proposals for alleviating this suffering put forward by the pro-abortion forces and the homosexual activists can actually deliver on that promise. One of the clichés I want to challenge in the process is the idea that adherence to traditional Christian morality – whether prompted by personal conviction or obedience to authority or, as in my case, both – is less charitable than the sort of shrugging tolerance that today wears the mantle of virtue without having to exercise either social courage or moral acumen.

It is inconceivable to many today that those who refuse to sacrifice the received wisdom of the ages to the spirit of this one might be motivated by compassion for the very people who demand that this sacrifice be made. But one doesn’t show compassion for a pedophile or an anorexic by making pedophilia and self-starvation into sacraments, or by listing them as a lifestyle options in public school textbooks. The Christian injunction against judgmentalism is not a recipe for anarchy. (The condemnation of “moralizing” is a form of moralizing, and sometimes the moral revolution it is used to advance is perfectly obvious.) Still less does the injunction against judging others justify placing several generations of young people in moral and spiritual jeopardy

⁵ Sergei S. Averintsev, “Marriage and Family: An Untimely Essay,” *Communio: International Catholic Journal*, Vol. XXX, Num. 4, winter, 2004.

by telling them, in effect, that the black diamond marker on the steep side of the snowy mountain is just a semiotic suggestion for those who happen to accept it as valid.

As for methodology, I will draw upon three forms of thought which are tenaciously realistic and – because of that tenacity – resistant to the currents of intellectual and moral fashion which today cloud the examination of fundamental human questions. They are: Girardian anthropology, biblical exegesis (albeit of a rather old-fashion variety) and Roman Catholic moral theology.

Since most of those in this colloquium will be at least as aware as I am of the mimetic implications of these remarks, I will not stop at every opportunity to draw these out. There will be times when the exploration of these matters will be just as fruitful if they are discussed in the more general terms more accessible to those unfamiliar with mimetic theory. I do this by no means to diminish the mimetic factors, but to make the argument I am here making in the non-technical terms more readily understood outside this colloquium.

BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN

There is, perhaps, another methodological principle worth invoking, a New Testament one. “Watch out,” Jesus admonished his disciples, “guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15). Despite the moral and religious chasm that separated the overly scrupulous Pharisees from the morally vulgar members of the Herodian court, they were eventually to find common cause in opposing Jesus and plotting his death. How, then, are we to understand Jesus’ warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod?

In the vast majority of its biblical contexts, leaven is that which causes the dough to rise, but which, in due course, also brings about its putrefaction. For Paul, it is, among other things, a metaphor for pride, that which puffs up. “Your boasting is not appropriate,” he warns the Corinthians. “Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened” (1 Corinthians 6:7). One way of understanding Jesus’ use of the leaven metaphor, therefore, is as a reference to two forms a pride that conspire to destroy the Gospel truth: the pride of the Pharisees – the pride of religious self-righteousness, fastidiousness and moral sanctimony – and the pride of Herod – the pride of apostasy, moral relativism, self-indulgence, and carnal shamelessness. The clash between these two forms of pride is predicable and everywhere in evidence. Today’s culture wars are replete with it. Jesus condemns them both.

In doing so, however, he does not suggest a moral equivalence between them. The vulgarity and venality of the Herodian court was widely known in Jesus' time and just as widely held in contempt by faithful Jews, whether they were followers of Jesus or not. On the other hand, as vehemently as the Pharisees oppose Jesus in the Gospel accounts, they were theologically and morally closer to him than any other identifiable Jewish group of his day. That he warned against the leaven of *both* the Pharisees and the Herodians is not due to any moral or religious equivalence. Rather, it is a warning about moral and epistemological pitfalls of scandal in the Girardian sense.

Today we confront moral and cultural issues that, had they arisen thirty or forty or fifty years ago, would have dumbfounded our parents and grandparents. These issues are made-to-order for the Pharisee-Herodian donnybrook that is occurring today in our midst. As unedifying as these controversies are, however, what is at stake could not be more critical. Neither fierce condemnation nor cooing acquiesce is a responsible option. We must try – and when we fail, try again – to deal with these issues without either the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of the Herodians. When all is said and done, however, there may remain bitter disagreements. We should be clear about that. Will our friendships survive these disagreements? We must hope so, and we must try to preserve them. Precarious indeed, however, are friendships which depend on the perpetuation of myths, even when the purpose of the myths is to preserve friendships. If our friendships are to survive in the long term, what must survive in the *meantime* is charity, specifically charity for those with whom we have profound disagreements.

It is as awkward for someone who is not homosexual to address these issues as it is for a man who does not face the very real difficulties that women with unplanned and unwelcome pregnancies face. If moral issues could only be raised by those personally confronting the moral dilemmas in question, and only by moral paragons, very little moral discourse would take place. Too little takes place as it is. I raise these issues, not because I am a moral paragon – on the contrary, I am a patchwork of sin and grace – but because there don't seem to be enough moral paragons around, the rest of us will have to pitch in.

TWO INDISPENSABLE RELATIONSHIPS

Both biologically and culturally, humanity depends on the resilience and health of two indispensable relationships: the nuptial relationship between a man and a woman and the parent-child relationship – most especially the early maternal relationship between mother and

child.⁶ While both the nuptial and parental bonds are rooted in mammalian nature and subtended by instinct, each regularly occasions ennobling and edifying acts of non-instinctual self-sacrifice. Since, in my view, the appearance of such non-instinctive acts of self-sacrifice represents the single most reliable indicator that the threshold from pre-human to human has been crossed, if any human relationships deserve to be called “the cradle of civilization,” it is surely these. Nothing of value in culture can endure if the spousal relationship between a man and a woman and the caring relationship between parent and child – especially between mother and child – are weakened, cheapened, relativized or betrayed. A culture which cannot privilege these relationships, accord them special protections, and insist on a greater degree of personal responsibility with regard to them, is socially reckless, morally adrift, and spiritually exhausted.

A mother choosing to end the life of the child in her womb is the more unnatural of the two issues that deserve our attention. Same-sex attraction is more complicated, and the gay lifestyle less physically destructive, and far less intentionally so. Inasmuch as Professor Bernadette Waterman-Ward will be addressing the abortion question, however, I will refer to it only in passing, relegating my original remarks on that subject to an appendix.⁷ Meanwhile, the current push to redefine marriage to include homosexual relationships deserves a far more careful scrutiny than it has been thus far been given in the popular press and in popular political discourse. In my view, it not only threatens to dismantle an understanding of marriage whose cultural pedigree could not be more unimpeachable, but – because it is ultimately premised on the self-authentication of desire – it threatens as well to superannuate the time-honored principle of subjecting desire to moral judgment, the *sine-qua-non* of moral reflection itself.

⁶ If I give special emphasis to the mother-child relationship, it is due in part to the special role of this relationship in the pre-parturition and very earliest post-parturition phase of a child’s life. Especially in light of the tragedy of fatherlessness in contemporary society, the relationship between father and child surely deserves more attention. Since space does not permit a discussion of this problem, suffice it simply to note that the moral fabric of cultural life is so interconnected that male irresponsibility toward both women and children is encouraged and exacerbated by the deterioration of the two relationships I shall be addressing. To wit: Since the U.S. courts have decided that a father has no legal right to interfere with the mother’s decision to abort the child – in other words, that the life or death of *his* child is none of *his* business – the law effectively encourages the father to regard his child as none of his business, whether the child is aborted or brought to term. Since, in either case, it is solely the mother’s “choice,” the courts will have provided a moral incentive for the father, whenever it is convenient, to simply accede to his irrelevance and ignore his responsibilities. Thus the betrayal of one of culture’s essential relationships becomes the occasion for the betrayal of another. The situation, alas, is even more labyrinthine, for not only do more and more children suffer to one degree or another from fatherlessness – either due to the physical absence of fathers or to their emotional and moral irrelevance – but fatherlessness is widely regarded as one of the factors contributing to a broad range of social and psychological anomalies, same-sex attraction among them.

⁷ Since my paper has been scheduled to be discussed in a session entitled “Mother and Child,” I may have an opportunity to explore it more during the discussion period.

The proposal to redefine marriage requires not so much the betrayal of one of the privileged relationships with which we should be concerned – the way the mother-child relationship is betrayed by abortion. Rather, it would relativize the nuptial relationship between a man and a woman, treating it as but one of several morally equivalent lifestyle preferences, no one of them worthy of cultural privileges not available to the others. The anthropological naiveté involved in this leveling and eventual redefinition of marriage and family, while admittedly not as morally abhorrent as the killing of children in the womb, is nevertheless a dangerous cultural gamble, fraught with unintended (but hardly unforeseeable) consequences. “Marriage is dying in Scandinavia,” writes Stanley Kurtz, of Stanford University’s Hoover Institute, “which has had marriage-like same-sex registered partnerships for over a decade.”

Data from European demographers and statistical bureaus show that a majority of children in Sweden and Norway are now born out of wedlock, as are 60 percent of first-born children in Denmark. In socially liberal districts of Norway, where the idea of same-sex registered partnerships is widely accepted, marriage itself has almost entirely disappeared.⁸

“Words end by having no meaning,” wrote Henri de Lubac, “when they have all meanings at once.”⁹

SPEAKING OF WORDS

Ideas have consequences, as do the words around which ideas sometimes congeal. Today sexuality is thought to consist of subsets, the primary ones being: *heterosexual* and *homosexual*, but, as we know, the sub-sub-sets are now multiplying almost as fast as did Protestant denominations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Something remotely analogous may be at work here. “Untune that string / And hark what discord follows.” As vertiginously as the new sexualities are forming and queuing up for canonical status, the precipitating event analogous to the publication of the ninety-five theses was considerably more innocuous. It was a simple lexicological notation that occurred in 1860. It was in that year that an almost unknown “moody, fluttering, imperfect” Hungarian writer coined the term *homosexual*, arguing that it should replace *pederast*, the word for sex between a man and a boy. The remarkable thing about his suggestion is that, when it was made, the word *heterosexual* did not exist. It turns out that the concept of homosexuality as we now know it not only predated the concept of heterosexuality, but the latter was coaxed into existence by the introduction of the former.

⁸ “Death of marriage in Scandinavia,” *The Boston Globe*, March 10, 2004.

⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Paule Simon and Sadie Kreilkamp, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 63.

Prior to this development, the overriding, if unspoken, assumption was that the word *sex* simply meant sex-between-a man-and-a-woman. That's what sex was. Other things involving genital stimulation or organism were, well, something else. At least this was the operational assumption in the minds of most people. Ah, but the Eskimos have a dozen words for snow, and in the Western world, all the hype to the contrary notwithstanding, winter was setting in.

No sooner had this new word *homosexual* appeared than the word *heterosexual* made its first appearance, looking for all the world like a mirror image of the word that required it as a foil. And, so, then there were two. The world would have to wait for Alfred Kinsey before someone would be confused enough to propose anything remotely approximating a statistical equivalence. (Kinsey made the absurd claim that 37% of men in the U.S. had achieved orgasm through contact with another male after adolescence.) Imperceptibly, however, the sense of equivalence grew, for the aura of equivalence was established by the obvious vis-à-vis quality of the two terms, or rather one word with two prefixes, one for each of the two major forms of sex. Nor did the terms maintain for long their distinctive contours, the process of undifferentiation, having been set in motion, continued its pace. A bisexual continuum was postulated, along which each person – according to his or her relative heterosexual and homosexual predilections – could be located. (Again, Kinsey's dubious data supplied the whiff of scientific seriousness, which was all that was required by his academic and philanthropic enthusiasts.) Once subjected to this taxonomic division, sex, as such, became a generic term, like the word “weather,” requiring and awaiting further specification.

Our thoughts follow the river-bed laid down for them in our language. If I fancy myself a “boundary crosser,” or one who “pushes the envelope,” I will have an entirely different attitude toward my behavior and its consequences than if I were to use, say, the more humble and respectful vocabulary of traditional morality, which does not *automatically* assume that all boundaries are an affront to the élan vital of the robust and that all norms are prisons. Analogously, the vocabulary we use to speak of sexuality determines to a very great extent how we think about it. Since the inconspicuous introduction of the term homosexual, followed forthwith by heterosexual, the vocabulary for speaking of sexual activities has grown astonishingly, while the vocabulary for speaking of the nuptial mystery has so contracted that it was finally left to an aging celibate to begin the process of retrieving it.

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

Are there loving and lasting relationships between people of the same sex? Of course there are. Many of us have friends in such relationships, people we admire, people who are almost surely less sinful than ourselves. When it comes to re-defining marriage in ways that amount to defining it out of existence, however, anecdotal instances of admirable homosexual relationships should carry no more weight than the analogous stories from the American South of fifty years ago about the loving relationships that existed between white families and their black nannies. Many of these stories were just as true as those about stable and happy homosexual relationships. Neither the one nor the other should be automatically dismissed as false, nor should either be heavily weighted in the debate over social policy. Anecdotal evidence of this kind is a poor basis for making cultural changes in general, and especially for making such sweeping ones as the ones now being proposed. Twenty years after the communist revolution in Cuba the literacy rate had been improved significantly; as crime rates in New York and Chicago were going off the charts circa, say, 1970, in Moscow they were infinitesimally small; and Germany under the Nazis was the first European country to identify the link between tobacco use and cancer and to launch programs designed to reduce tobacco dependence. These anecdotes deserve very little weight when judging the wisdom of the communist regimes in Cuba and the Soviet Union and the Nazi tyranny in Germany.

Anecdotal evidence for loving and happy polygamous marriages can be found, and more will almost certainly be surfacing soon, as will anecdotal evidence for the loving contentment experienced by people in this or that or the other sexually experimental arrangement. Anecdotal evidence can surely be found for incestuous relationships between brother and sister or between a parent and an adult child, and they, too, will surface in due course and demand their rights, objecting to the “scapegoating” that keeps them from enjoying the privileges of marriage. Smiling faces and testimonies of contentment will appear, faces of the nicest people in the world, genuinely nice people. The captions beneath these smiling faces will – explicitly or implicitly – ask: why can’t their relationship be a marriage? Or perhaps more practically: why can’t they receive the same tax-advantages that married heterosexuals do? If social policy is made to adjust to such anecdotal evidence, it will adjust itself into complete incoherence. The question is: is traditional marriage, marriage between a man and a woman, different from these other relationships or not? The answer is: of course it is. Does it deserve the privilege that it has

enjoyed for thousands of years, a privilege that receives solemn recognition in the Hebrew scriptures and is explicitly affirmed by Christ in the Gospels? The answer is simply obvious.

IN THE BEGINNING ...

Cultural hominization as envisioned by mimetic theory may entail a logical contradiction, namely, that the threshold from the pre-human to the human is crossed by the killing of a human. Human culture – which is to say, human religion – begins when a terrifying episode of collective violence is transformed by the polarization of the violence onto one hapless victim, against whom all unite, experiencing thereby a social bond in such stark contrast to the terror it replaced that the event is interpreted religiously. In the aftermath of such an experience – and with the gradual working out of rituals, myths, and taboos – cultural life establishes a tenuous foothold, and humanity is born. Key to this hominization is a “cathartic” event which the killing of an animal – absent ritual intensification which could not exist prior to human culture – could not have produced. Thus the conundrum: It took a human victim to produce the requisite catharsis which coincided with hominization.

My suggestion is that the same combination of anthropological, scriptural, and psychological acuties that Girard synthesized in arriving at his theory of culture formation converge as well to suggest a prior preparatory phase of a very slightly elongated hominization process. For lack of better terminology, I will speak of this preliminary stage as the ontological or prelapsarian hominization, which gives way in very short order to mimetic complications, rivalry, violence, and a subsequent social hominization as described above and with which we are all familiar.¹⁰

As mentioned, my exegetical strategy is, by present standards, rather quaint. I will adopt an approach similar to that of the Church Fathers with one amendment. I will read the scriptural passages relevant to my purpose as the Church Fathers might have read them had they had a copy of Girard's *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* and John Paul II's *The Theology of the Body* on their bookshelves.

Mimetic theory has tended to corroborate a rather Hobbesian picture of the lives of our most ancient ancestors, adding its own testimony to the repudiation of the blissful Rousseauistic myth of peaceful origins, and properly so. However appropriate this deconstruction of romantic

¹⁰ These terms, “ontological hominization” and “prelapsarian hominization” are, admittedly, imprecise, and they may suffer from other defects of which I am currently not aware, but I trust that the points I am trying to make by using these terms will be clear enough in any case. A more precise vocabulary for making my argument may await the drafting of the argument in these preliminary terms.

idylls may be, if unnuanced, it threatens to betray a very important feature of biblical thought, namely, the goodness of creation and an originary innocence. Attempts to find evidence for peaceful primitive societies or even to imagine them – the perennial hobby of Western romantics – are, of course, doomed. But, on close reading, the poetics of the biblical story of origins has to do, not with peace in a wider social context, but with a single relationship, that between a man and a woman, and more precisely with the very moment when that relationship becomes a relationship, a moment which the Genesis text intimates was short-lived and which, in anthropological actuality, was almost surely *very* short-lived. This relationship both originates and achieves its incontrovertible apogee when a profound recognition of the contra-sexual other occurs: “This, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). The first two chapters of Genesis suggest that the likely site of the ontological hominization – where nature most predisposes the pre-human creature to an authentically human recognition of the *other* and to non-instinctual acts of self-donation on the other’s behalf – is the non-mimetic erotic attraction between a man and a woman. However ephemeral that moment of original other-orientation might have been, and however inevitably followed by possessiveness, domination, rivalry and so on, assuming only that it had the ontological ramifications of which it is, in my view, capable, it would mark the threshold between animal and human life, a crossing which could not thereafter be fully retraced in the opposite direction.

THE MIND OF CHRIST

St. Paul urges us to be not conformed to the spirit of this age and, instead, to put on the mind of Christ. We are familiar enough with the spirit of this age; far too familiar, in fact, but the mind of Christ is another matter, a far greater mystery. What might we say of it? First and foremost, of course, the mind of Christ is a mind at prayer, a mind in communion at every moment. Beyond this, however, it is a mind inordinately concerned with how humans are made, with human origins, with the meaning of the creation which the Creator declared to be “very good.” In short, it is a mind with a profoundly anthropological cast to it. It is not a mind that finds its bearings in Jewish law, and even less in Greek speculation. It is, remarkably, a mind concerned with “the beginning.” It is, after all, the mind of the New Adam.

We catch a glimpse of this mind at several points in the gospel accounts. One such glimpse, familiar to students of René Girard, is the moment in John’s Gospel when Jesus offers his Jewish audience a truth which he says will set them free. Taking umbrage, they sound for all the world like our contemporaries, insisting that they are perfectly free enough, and asserting their

Abrahamic patrimony. Recognizing the violence inherent in their incipient animosity, Jesus concedes that they are descendants of Abraham, but they are not, he insists, *children* of Abraham, for they are succumbing to the sacrificial temptation that Abraham famously resisted.

Understanding the meaning of this, Jesus says to them:

You belong to your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father's desires (*epithumias*). He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

We are as familiar with the anthropological meaning of this passage as we should be with the misuse to which it has sometimes been put by Christian anti-Semites. My point in invoking it is a small one. The passage indicates Jesus' concern with "the beginning." The devil has been a murderer, a liar and the father of lies, "from the beginning." Girard has masterfully drawn out the anthropological significance of this scriptural passage. If the murderer has been murdering "from the beginning," the beginning must have been a murder. Obviously, this "beginning" is a violent and murderous one.

All of this is familiar to those indebted as we are to René Girard, but there is another instance of the mind of Christ brooding over beginnings in the Gospel accounts, and I want to draw attention to it. The beginning to which it refers appears to have no connection to the murderous beginning of the Johannine passage. This reference to the beginning is part of Jesus' response to what seems a trick question about the Mosaic law regarding divorce. To the Pharisees' cunning legalistic question, Jesus gives an anthropological reply. He is concerned, not with how meticulously we keep the codified law, but with how we humans were made "in the beginning."

He said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate." They said to him, "Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss (her)?" He said to them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. (Matthew 19:4-8)¹¹

¹¹ Previously I acknowledged the awkwardness I feel as a heterosexual male in commenting on abortion and the redefinition of marriage to include homosexual relationships. On the question of divorce, the awkwardness is of the opposite sort. I have been divorced. I stand under the judgment of the New Testament in this regard, and I readily acknowledge that this is the case. Today, however, I am more happily – and sacramentally – married than I deserve to

Here Jesus speaks again of “the beginning,” but this beginning is a prelapsarian one, one which obviously retains a normative status for Jesus, a beginning to which he appeals in overriding the Mosaic concession about divorce, a concession made because of humanity’s fallen hard-heartedness.

Imagine Jesus quoting Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or Dante’s *Purgatorio* or T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Would we not want to pour over the quoted text in search of what made it so important to him? Or, imagine that while in the midst of a heated cultural debate about the possible inclusion of homosexual relationships in the definition of marriage, a heretofore unknown but well-authenticated late first century text is found in which Jesus quotes from the Genesis account of creation, and lays special emphasis on the fact that God created humanity “male and female,” insisting thereupon that this gender differentiation is the *sine qua non* of marriage. How might such a discovery impact the cultural debate over the meaning of marriage, at least for Christians and Jews? Imagine the discovery of a text in which Jesus interprets key Genesis texts in a stricter, more rigorous, and more “conservative” way than had Moses. What effect would the discovery of such a text have on the debate on the meaning of marriage in a culture with an attenuated but still discernable Christian foundation? The impact might be expected to be great indeed. Well, of course, such a text exists and it is widely known, and not everyone has ignored its cultural relevance. By retracing Jesus’ exegetical path from the debate with Pharisees about the nature of the nuptial bond to the Genesis account of human engendering, John Paul II has located what he calls “the first draft of anthropology.” We who presume to be working on later drafts should take a closer look.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the Pharisees raise the thorny question of divorce. Clearly the horizon of their question is a moral and especially a legal one: What conforms to the Law of Moses? As we said, the horizon of Jesus’ answer is *anthropological*. In offering an anthropological response to their moral and legal question, however, Jesus in no way suggests that the Mosaic criteria can or should be ignored. On the contrary, his point is that Moses’ leniency with regard to divorce was a concession that Jesus himself was clearly less willing to make. This same pattern is found whenever Jesus confronts moral matters that bear on the “one-flesh” mystery of nuptial life. Almost immediately after saying that, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven”

be. If I speak of the need to recover a sense of the nuptial mystery, I do so as one who has both lost it and recovered it.

(Matthew 5:20), Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28). Here, the Pharisees ask: is it legal for a man to divorce his wife, and Jesus says, in effect, what’s at stake in their question is not the Mosaic law, but the anthropological facts: how humans are made and why we were made that way. (There is no reason whatsoever to assume that, in defense of marriage, Jesus would have been more accommodating if he had been confronted, not with a question about divorce, but with the question of homosexuality.)

GENESIS - CREATION STORIES

Genesis contains two originally independent creation stories, in chapters one and two, the account in the second chapter of Genesis being the more ancient of the two. Interestingly, Jesus quotes them both, locating in each the verses which have the greatest anthropological weight. Jesus refers to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24, precisely the verses which John Paul II has termed “the first draft of anthropology.”

“Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? (Matthew 19:4-5)

Genesis 1:27 forges an unmistakable link between being made in the image of God and being made male and female, the complete passage being: “So God created humankind [*adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them; male (masculine, *zakar*) and female (feminine, *uneqebah*) he created them.” Jesus uses these two anthropological facts – that humans are created in the image of God and that they are *therefore* created *for* one another as contra-sexual beings – as a bridge back to the question of divorce, which is, of course, simply a question as to exactly how profound the marriage bond really is. The Pharisees want to know what the rules are; but Jesus calls their attention to the anthropological mystery – inscribed in gender differences – that the rules exist to protect and preserve.

Being made in the image of God and being made male and female are not only the parallel elements of a single verse, but they seem to be even more intimately related. For a Christian, this verse contains an inchoate recognition of the Trinitarian intercommunion, against the theological backdrop of which humanity’s sexual differentiation takes on new meaning. The meaning of human maleness and femaleness cannot be fully appreciated solely by reference to its evolutionary antecedent, but only by reference to the ontological fulfillment toward which this

antecedent is ordered. Grace perfects nature. If, in the animal world, sexuality is purely and solely ordained toward biological reproduction, in the human realm it has an additional ontological ordination, one that, to this day, has yet to be anthropologically appreciated and theologically assimilated. The reference to Adam's sleep in the second chapter of Genesis serves as an apt analogue for the immense evolutionary preparation for the moment of ontological hominization as well as for the long, slow process of theological, sacramental and anthropological assimilation, a critical stage of which is being played out in our time and in our midst.

“The seeds deposited in the Bible flower only after many centuries,” writes Paul Evdokimov. “A completely new spirituality is asserting itself today, one that is searching for neither more nor less than a priestly vocation in conjugal love...”¹² Undoubtedly the boldest and most comprehensive assertion of the “priestly vocation in conjugal love” today is that made by John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body*, where, for instance, he says this about Adam's exclamation:

When man, the male, awakening from the sleep of Genesis, saw the female, drawn from him, he said: “This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gn 2:23). These words express, in a way, the subjectively beatifying beginning of human existence in the world.”¹³

This bold suggestion invites a Girardian assimilation. The Bible clearly depicts the birth of the human prior to the fall, not simultaneous with it, as is sometimes assumed in our (Girardian) readings. The theory of the founding murder is rigorous because, once the mimetic dynamics are understood, it makes more sense than anything else. As we often point out, it is naïve to expect the spontaneous emergence of a “social contract” in primordial times (or even in more contemporary settings). On the other hand, the spontaneous development of a mimetic crisis, leading ineluctably to polarization and climaxing in unanimous violence makes perfect sense. Is there an analogous “moment” in the emergence, not of human culture, but of what is the quintessential human experience, the experience of communion? The Pope assumes that there is, and that its textual outcropping in the Genesis story is Adam's exclamation upon recognizing the woman. I think John Paul's reading of the relevant Genesis texts is consonant with a mimetic analysis of human beginnings.

¹² Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 41.

¹³ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 61.

The decisive moment of ontological or prelapsarian hominization occurs when a transitional creature looks into the eyes of another (as animals do not) and has an experience that corresponds to Adam's: "This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." To be a member of a species that has the capacity to have this experience is to be human.¹⁴ And, under the right circumstances, to have this experience with some measure of its spiritual, emotional, and ontological profundity, is to have an intimation of Trinitarian life. Of course, this moment of "ontological hominization" is as elusive as the moment of social hominization with which we are familiar, and it is even less likely to leave discoverable traces. Moreover, in the first instance, the experience of pure other-recognition must have lasted but a brief moment, but its inevitably short half-life takes nothing away from its ontological significance. For, as Coventry Patmore reminds us:

Love wakes men, once a lifetime each;
They lift their heavy lids and look;
And, lo, what one sweet page can teach
They read with joy, then shut the book:
And some give thanks, and some blaspheme,
And most forget; but, either way,
That and the child's unheeded dream
Is all the light of all their day.¹⁵

This experience need only last for a nanosecond in order to have lasting effects. A nanosecond later, the mimetic intrigue begins: "Who's going to take her/him away from me?" "The woman made me do it." and so on, and so on. No sooner would the "this, at last..." moment have occurred than it would have been swept up into a mimetic soap opera of some sort, but a nanosecond is all it takes. All that the biblical account seems to insist on is that a moment of such blessedness precede the fall. As John Paul put it in his *Theology of the Body* lectures:

... man became the "image and likeness" of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons which man and woman form right from the

¹⁴ It is important to note that one's humanity is established by membership in the species that has this uniquely powerful relational potential. It is not dependent on the individual's ability to actualize potential at any given moment in his or her life. *One becomes a member of the human race by having human parents and at the moment of conception*, but what distinguishes the human race is the potential for the *communio* experience, regardless of whether or how fully any one human being is able or willing to enter into the experience.

¹⁵ "Revelation," Quoted: *The Harper Anthology of Poetry*, Ed. John Frederick Nims, (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 414.

beginning. ... Man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion.¹⁶

Each human being is a person by nature and a person by grace. Each of us is a biological person from the moment of conception and an ontological person from the moment, often just as elusive, when the longing for communion is in some way consummated, a longing that is the spiritual mark of our humanity, and for which we are physically and biologically predisposed as sexually differentiated beings. There is, in other words, an ontology of nature and ontology of grace, and they meet and mutually reveal their interconnection in the nuptial mystery. Prelapsarian humanity begins at the moment when grace perfects nature – when sexual instinct gives way (for one nanosecond at least) to genuine self-donating communion. This is the mystery that is so marvelously captured by the poet of Genesis 2. The anthropological ramification of this text is *not* that we only become human due to sexual ardor, but that our sexuality is ultimately ordered – “male and female he made them” – toward the human vocation of complete self-donation. The spark crosses the space between the poles of nature and grace, between pre-human and human existence, where the proximity of nature and grace is the closest: in the sexual attraction between a man and a woman.

Lest all this appear too speculative, let me quote passages from two poems by the American poet, Theodore Roethke. The first is a passage from his poem, *The Partner*, in which one senses that the poet has intimations of the threshold crossing from pre-human to human:

Between such animal and human heat
I find myself perplexed. What is desire? —
The impulse to make someone else complete?
That woman would set sodden straw on fire.
Was I the servant of a sovereign wish,
Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?¹⁷

The second Roethke poem, *Words for the Wind!*, is a marvelous expression of the “this, at last...” experience to which the Genesis account alludes:

I kiss her moving mouth,
Her swart hilarious skin;
She breaks my breath in half;

¹⁶ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 46.

¹⁷ *The Partner*.

She frolics like a beast;
And I dance round and round,
A fond and foolish man,
And see and suffer myself
In another being, at last.¹⁸

That the Pope would explore this territory with more circumspection should come as no surprise, but what is perhaps surprising is that it is this territory that he insists must be explored, not for its titillation but for its ontological ramifications and sacramental meaning. Like Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, John Paul looks to "the beginning" to get his bearings, the better to assess the moral, social and sexual crisis that was overtaking Western cultures in the late 1970s and early 1980s when he delivered his theology of the body lectures. By reading the Genesis account of creation in light of Jesus' recapitulation of it in the synoptic gospels, the Pope argues that the moment of ontological hominization is inherently nuptial. As the world's most famous celibate, he can hardly be accused of a naturalistic reduction. The nuptiality of which he speaks is as concretely corporeal as it is spiritually and religiously meaningful. John Paul is determined, not only to eliminate every shred of the Manichaeism that has haunted Christian theology for two millennia, but also to free Christian thought from lingering Neo-Platonic conceptions that subtly or not so subtly discount or denigrate the meaning and personal significance of our corporeal embodiment. We are bodies, and our bodies, except in the most obviously tragic cases, are unambiguously male or female. We are men and women, not humans who just happen coincidentally to *have* male or female bodies.

The irony is perfect. At the very moment when the octogenarian celibate is urging the faithful to return from the Manichaean, Neo-Platonic, and Gnostic wilderness to the grounded biblical realism and an incarnational Christian faith, the post-Christian hedonists, with a gaggle of Christians in tow, are forsaking their erstwhile body-worship in favor of a Gnostic contempt for its spiritual and moral meaning. Why? Because the crisis of distinctions finally reaches the point at which all distinctions, be they ever so irreducible, must give way to desire. Desire trumps everything; nothing must stand in its way, not moral standards, not laws, not decency, not the next generation, not whatever body one happens to *have* at one's disposal, nothing.

It certainly comes as no surprise to those schooled in Girardian thought that a very likely factor in the onset of the mimetic crisis that led to the birth of human culture would have been

¹⁸ *Words for the Wind!*

rivalry over sexual partners. My proposal in this regard is a modest one: that the single-victim mechanism which gives rise to the event of social hominization is preceded by a moment of ontological hominization, at which sexual attraction of creates the necessary preconditions for a genuinely human, albeit admittedly rudimentary, other-recognition and evanescent experience of self-donation: “this, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” In the threshold world of our most ancient ancestors these two moments may have been almost indistinguishable. For the instinctual contra-sexual attraction which serves as the natural prelude to other-recognition and a rudimentary experience of self-donation on the part of the man and woman, serves, sans grace, to precipitate the crisis which leads precipitously to sacrificial violence. In other words, originary forms of humanity’s only two sacrificial options – violent sacrifice and self-sacrifice – might be traceable to instinctual contra-sexual attraction, further linking a fleeting but irreversible ontological hominization – a momentary Eden – with a subsequent social hominization: the first of the kingdoms of “this world.”

SUITABLE PARTNER

The Biblical drama of hominization effectively begins with the verse in the first chapter of Genesis in which the fact that humans are made in the image of God and the fact that they are made male and female are conjoined. The drama continues, in the second chapter, when God says: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him” (Genesis 2:18). This “suitable partner”, according to Eugene H. Maly, writing in the Jerome Biblical Commentary, implies both sexual complementarity and ontological equality. It is ludicrous to suggest that it was just an oversight or a culturally induced homophobic reflex that prevented the biblical writer and his subsequent redactors from including other sexual arrangements to a catalogue of “suitable partners” capable of entering into this primordial sacrament.

The reason it is not good that man should be alone is not that alone his social welfare or psychological wellbeing might suffer, but simply because the human person is ontologically oriented to an other, or as Girard would say, the human psychological situation is not that of individuality, but of interdividuality. It would be the stuff of stand-up comedy to suggest that what makes the Genesis partners suitable for one another is their social or psychological compatibility. On the contrary, the Genesis text could not be clearer: their mutual suitability is inscribed in their bodies as masculinity and femininity. In fact, it is the only thing we know about them at this point. Far from being merely the vestige of a meaningless biological and evolutionary development that gender difference is in non-human creatures, by biblical

standards, human contra-sexuality serves a higher ontological purpose, namely the one-flesh experience which is epitomized by Adam’s “This, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23), the scriptural marker for what John Paul II has called, “the subjectively beatifying beginning of human existence in the world.”¹⁹

The “one flesh” passage in Genesis, to which Jesus explicitly refers in replying to questions about divorce, is typically passed over lightly, as though it were but a poetic allusion to, or metaphor for, interpersonal contentment or sexual intimacy. As John Paul’s assessment suggests, a consensus is forming within Catholic theology which attributes ontological significance to this “one flesh” reference. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for instance, quotes with approval the assertion that nuptial spouses become “two poles of one single reality, two different realizations of one single being, two *entia* in one single *case*, one existences in two lives...”²⁰ It is in keeping with this understanding of the nuptial mystery that Catholic sacramental theology treats the wedding of man and woman as having ontological consequences, which in turn are premised on a natural sexual difference which is ordained, not just to reproduction, but to the “one-flesh” *communio* – “one existence in two lives.” The subtle effect of the ontology of communion is no argument against it. The formal sacrament of matrimony exists to raise this subtle effect to consciousness so that its potential beneficiaries might be more likely to become its actual beneficiaries.

The mystery of the “one-flesh” *communio* is the mystery of *oneness* and *otherness*, and its ontological potential is circumscribed by these two requirements. If the oneness of being is inadequate – as it often is in a culture as dedicated to autonomy as ours is today – then otherness remains a source of alienation. If the otherness is impaired – as it is, for instance, in the case of homoerotic or incestuous relationships – then its ontological potential is lost. We are all altered by our relationships, and often enough indelibly so: those we love become part of our lives. There is hardly a more powerful and permanent love than that of a parent for a child, but the origin of that love is the nuptial love of the parents for one another, and it is this nuptial relationship to which the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament ascribe unique ontological significance. Other relationships, however psychologically profound and worthy of social solicitude, lack the biological, psychological, emotional, and spiritual complementarity that gives the nuptial act between a man and a woman its uniqueness, its capacity to transform their sexual otherness into an occasion for a deeper union. The relationship between a parent and a

¹⁹ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 61.

²⁰ *The Von Balthasar Reader*, trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. and Fred Lawrence, (New York: Crossroad Hearder, 1997), 73.

child, the sibling relationship, deep and abiding friendships – intense as these are and as worthy as they are of our efforts to foster them, these relationships do not have the ontological potential which is the exclusive privilege of the nuptial relationship between a man and a woman. If relationships as natural and as subtended by instinctual bonds as the parent-child and sibling relationships do not share in this privilege, it can hardly be argued that homosexual relationships can share in it.

The natural meaning of conjugal union is childbearing, and the natural outcome of nuptial love is the family. The Church insists that marriage has two dimensions, the procreative and the unitive. The deeper ontological meaning of the unitive, though it is celebrated sacramentally, has yet to be fully assimilated either theologically or anthropologically. Until this assimilation takes place, the unitive dimension of spousal love will continue to be regarded by many as synonymous with sexual pleasure or romantic feelings or perhaps the periodic restoration of marital congeniality. It is, in part, this inadequate appreciation of the nuptial mystery of human self-donation that John Paul II set out to rectify by lecturing on the theology of the body. The experience commemorated in the Genesis text by Adam's exclamation "This, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," and about which Coventry Patmore writes, "love wakes men once a lifetime each," is quite simply the most complete expression of the human experience par excellence: self-donation. Structured in the image and likeness of the trinitarian *communio*, the marital union brings about a human *homoousia*, a one-flesh *communio* unlike that of which any other relationship is capable.

The equivalent of this ontologically decisive moment of nuptial other-recognition in the life of a consecrated celibate is nowhere better depicted in scripture than at Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan river. "And a voice came from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). This is the Trinitarian analogue for Adam's "this, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." Similarly, the equivalent in the life of committed chastity or virginity might be located in Mary's response to the angel of the annunciation: "be it done unto me according to your word." Each of these passages refers to a free act of unreserved self-donation, implicit in which is the donation of one's body which, inscribed as it is as male or female, includes the gift of sexual exclusivity. The nuptial relationship between a man and a woman remains, therefore, the natural archetype and paradigm for all forms of nuptial of self-donation. Mutatis mutandis, Jesus' admonition with regard to divorce –

“what God has joined together, no human being must separate” – would apply as well to these non-conjugal but nevertheless nuptial forms of self-donation.

To say that the conjugal *communio* is only possible to vowed love between a man and a woman is to say that it requires both gender complementary and the absence of mimetic rivals, the vow serving to eliminate such rivals from the functional domain of wedded life. In addition to its social efficacy in preventing conflict, however, this exclusivity is of the essence of the “one-flesh” ontology. As Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses it:

To one who loves, it would seem the rankest disloyalty to set beside the beloved a second possible object of choice in order, by a kind of qualitative analysis, to give preference to the first. Such indifference about the object of its choice may be an initial stage on the road to love; but within love itself it has no place. Love is so steadfast that it never reverts to the point of indifference that precedes choice. It rejects “freedom of choice” in favor of freedom of love.²¹

ROMANTIC LOVE ...

It took centuries of theological controversy for Christian thought to formulate Trinitarian and Christological doctrines which successfully resisted the temptation to betray one or another of the profound paradoxes these doctrines eventually enshrined. The fact that these doctrinal achievements were originally provoked by heresies should not be overlooked. It was in part at least the Arian heresy in the fourth century and the Nestorian heresy in the fifth that provided the impetus that led to the Trinitarian insights of the Nicæan Council and the Christological formulas of Chalcedon. Thus it is that the Christian tradition mines new treasures from the Gospel mother-lode in response to worldly challenges. In each such instance, the synthesizing power of the Gospel revelation struggles to retain the essential paradoxes – death and resurrection, self-donation and self-possession, freedom and obedience, and so on – in the face of the centripetal forces that would eliminate them or reduce them to simple antinomies.

Just as it was only after several hundred years of theological effort and fierce controversy that the Church found reasonably workable formulas with which to express its Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, so for the last several hundred years Christian cultures have been grappling with equally unfathomable paradoxes, in this case those having to do with the meaning of sexuality and marriage. For centuries, this struggle was thought to be merely a moral one, but in very recent years it has begun to be recognized as a theological and anthropological struggle as

²¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 30.

well. Today we may be living through a period comparable in some ways to the fourth and fifth centuries, for we are surrounded by a massive struggle over the meaning and role of sexuality, marriage, and family, a struggle which may prove to be just as decisive for the practical living out of Christian faith as were the struggles of the fourth and fifth centuries.

If, as Hans Urs von Balthasar argues, it was terribly difficult for pre-Christian anthropology to “situate the phenomenon of sexuality within a total interpretation of being,”²² at a dizzying speed the *post*-Christian world is growing impervious to the mystery of nuptiality and forfeiting thereby one of Christianity’s enduring contributions to human self-understanding. The extraordinary role of marriage, covenant, and bride-and-groom metaphors in the Hebrew scriptures notwithstanding, not even there can we find more than a few hints of the privilege accorded to our engendering as male and female and the nuptial mystery of their communion. Writes von Balthasar:

The Song of Songs stands alone in the Old Testament: an ideal which nowhere is realized in the history of salvation and which must wait for the New Testament before it can become the inner kernel of all thought about the history of salvation.²³

This is the issue succinctly put: Is the nuptial mystery, as John Paul and von Balthasar suggest, “the inner kernel of all thought about the history of salvation”? That such a thing seems preposterous is disconcerting, but that it seems *increasingly* preposterous is both genuinely alarming and highly significant. We are giving up hard won ground.

“It seems – or seemed to us till lately – a natural thing that love (under certain conditions) should be regarded as a noble and ennobling passion,” C. S. Lewis wrote in the 1930s. Lewis went on to remark, however, that it is only when we “imagine ourselves trying to explain this doctrine to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul, or the author of *Beowulf* that we become aware how far from natural it is.”²⁴ When Lewis here declares that the new experience of love as noble and ennobling is “far from natural,” what he means – and what he came later to recognize more clearly after his conversion – is that this new experience of ennobling passion is a *Christian* experience and not just an instinctual one. It is “far from natural” in the sense that it is far more than merely the outworking of biological instinct. It is more, not less, than the reproductive

²² *The Von Balthasar Reader*, trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. and Fred Lawrence, (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997), 74.

²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 106-7.

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*.

instinct. For the reproductive instinct, circa the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and thereafter, was not having this effect in non-Christian cultures.

We noted earlier Paul Evdokimov's remark to the effect that the "seeds deposited in the Bible flower only after many centuries," and that these seeds that began to flower seven or eight hundred years ago were the seeds of what Evdokimov calls "priestly vocation in conjugal love." The flowering of this vocation fundamentally altered the cultural imagination of those cultures – Christian cultures they were – in which it emerged, distinguishing them, as C. S. Lewis noted, from other cultures, past and present. Charles Williams writes:

There entered into the relations between the sexes a philosophical, even a religious, idea. The idea had a very long life before it, and was to undergo many unfortunate and fortunate chances. On the one hand, like many other religious ideas, it was to become a superstition; on the other hand, it was to be, naturally and regrettably, cold-shouldered by the ecclesiastical authorities. It was to be an indulgence to the populace and a stumbling-block to the Puritans ... It was to save and endanger souls. And it is still quite uncertain what will happen to it. It may utterly disappear from the earth. But if not, the popular idea of it will probably have to undergo a good deal of purification. In fact, and in itself, it is a thing not of superstition and indulgence, but of doctrine and duty, and not of achievement but of promise.²⁵

"Real changes in human sentiment are very rare – there are perhaps three or four on record," mused C. S. Lewis, "but I believe that they occur, and that this is one of them."²⁶ One of the nineteenth century celebrants of this mystery, Coventry Patmore, located its origin, as did von Balthasar, in the Christian incarnation. It is Christ, said Patmore, who has turned the water of nature into the wine of the Marriage Feast. That we find such a statement mystifying is further evidence that we are daily growing less able, in von Balthasar's words, to "situate the phenomenon of sexuality within a total interpretation of being."

As baffling as it surely seems to us today, it was only as the anthropological significance of the self-donating unity-in-otherness of the Christian Trinity gradually came to cultural consciousness by way of doctrine and liturgical worship that the first lyrical intimations of the deeper human meaning of erotic longing and sexual attraction began to appear. The emergence in the Christian West of the romantic mythology, for all its excesses and flaws, and confused as it was with dangerous Gnostic and Persian influences, remains one of the most important cultural

²⁵ Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

shifts in human history. “Compared with this revolution,” wrote C. S. Lewis, “the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature.” As Nicholas Boyle put the matter:

The romance of *Lancelot* which suborned Paolo and Francesca was secular literature, sinful in its effects and perhaps in its intentions, but it was quite certainly Christian. The love that it invoked derived its seductive power from its being the same love, albeit aberrant in its object, as that which will draw Dante on, through the fires in which so many secular poets of love are purged to the ultimate vision of the *Paradiso*.²⁷

Confusion was inevitable, not altogether unlike the theological confusion of the fourth and fifth centuries that surrounded the great Church councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon. The sacred and the profane were commingling profusely, with strange consequences. In a mirror image of what happened to the celibate Catholic clergy in the last quarter of the 20th century, for instance, the troubadours who mediated this massive reordering of the human imagination entered monasteries in surprising numbers and with remarkable enthusiasm. Songs of the troubadours, themselves amalgams of Ovid and the Song of Songs, were one moment the ballads of secular chivalry and the next, with the merest of alterations, liturgical hymns. In the 12th century, writes Colin Morris, “we are in the presence of a huge change in the ideals of society,” a change which was not only giving birth to “a new cultural pattern with great significance for the future,” but one that “made personal devotion the essential feature of a true man-woman relationship.”²⁸ This relationship was becoming the central preoccupation of the Christian West. A phenomenon as religiously and erotically ambiguous as this steaming caldron of the sacred and the profane was sure to be unwieldy. It was, Charles Williams observed, “to save and endanger souls.”²⁹

If this dangerous new intensity of erotic attraction had its source in the incarnation, why did it “flower only after many centuries,” as Paul Evdokimov observes?³⁰ In alluding to the necessarily historical character of the Bible’s cultural and spiritual impact, Evdokimov is simply recognizing yet another way in which, in the Christian economy, grace perfects nature. One form of nature that is perfected by grace is the chronological nature of human experience, and, like eroticism, its perfection occurs without violation of its prior nature. Just as the sacramental and ontological mystery of nuptiality builds on antecedent instinctual and biological realities, so,

²⁷ Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1998), 292.

²⁸ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 108.

²⁹ Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 87.

³⁰ Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 41.

too, does this mystery enter into human awareness in obedience to the laws of historical and cultural development. Not only did the deepest dimension of nuptiality await the incarnation, but it awaited the cultural and historical processes required for its gradual assimilation and articulation. Only as this process developed could the spiritual and ontological significance of sexual intimacy begin to be recognized.

The perfection of nature by grace is not, like the love potion of mythology, or the arrows of Cupid, something that overtakes someone without his or her consent. It can be refused or resisted and its ontological potential renounced. The question is whether and to what extent this ontological/sacramental potential is actualized. A very great deal will depend on whether a person has been made aware of the ontological/sacramental potential, and prepared for the acts of consent, self-surrender, and self-donation essential to its actualization. The role of the Church in this regard, in my view, is to foster the conditions most propitious to the actualization of this potential by calling attention to it and by providing the moral framework and encouraging the sacramental sensibilities commensurate with its actualization. As secularization of Western culture has proceeded, however, the groping and clumsy attempts on the part of the troubadours and their romantic descendants to “situate the phenomenon of sexuality within a total interpretation of being” have largely been abandoned and betrayed. The result is a tendency toward feral forms of coupling perfunctorily performed by those without a clue about the “priestly vocation in conjugal love,” nor the possibility that the water of nature might become the wine of the marriage feast.

ATTACKING CHRISTIAN ETHICS

“Love is the state in which man sees things most of all as they are *not*,” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche. “The illusion-creating force is there at its height...”³¹ This, writes Girard, is Nietzsche expressing both his “will to deny truth” and, more specifically, his repudiation of “the epistemology of love.” Nietzsche, of course, was too paranoid and too turned in upon himself to have known much about the mystery of nuptial love, but, when, as here, he moralizes with a hammer, it is clear that his rejection of love is a rejection by proxy of Christianity itself. In 1983, while he was in the midst of his magnum opus, *History of Sexuality*, and dying from AIDS, Michel Foucault, one of Nietzsche’s heirs, told an interviewer that “sex is boring.”

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §23; quoted: René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 278.

The sexual controversies today are not ultimately about sex, with which many of the revolutionaries are now as bored as Foucault was. “There is (in the ‘every cloud has a silver lining’ sense) at least this one benefit brought by the sexual revolution,” writes the Russian scholar, Sergei Averintsev, “once and for all it has removed from depravity the charm that attaches to what is dangerous and daring,” and it has done this, Averintsev says, “by laying bare as never before its banality; by creating for the defense of its ‘rights’ an entire system of ideological clichés, tedious in their predictability, as clichés of that sort always are.”³² Enormous effort, of course, has gone into making all this boredom and banality seemed as exciting as the daring sexual liberationists of yore once imagined it to be – the appellation of “gay” to the male homosexual lifestyle one spectacular instance of this effort.

Much of today’s sexuality, and very much of the experimental forms of sexuality that are now so prominent, is too spiritually vacuous to be sexually interesting, much less exciting. Sex that’s only about sex is boring and shameful, and a good deal of effort today goes into keeping the bored from recognizing the boredom and keeping the feelings of shame from having their full effect. So, sexuality today is little more than a great clamorous coliseum into which Western culture is being crowded for the purpose of deciding between a Christian and a pagan worldview. As usual, Friedrich Nietzsche understood this in his own twisted way. Nietzsche despised Christianity, but he despised as well the half-hearted rejection of it that Western liberalism had accomplished. The Enlightenment thinkers rejected Christianity, but they secularized and perpetuated in weakened form many of Christianity’s moral premises. Nietzsche found this Christian residue entirely unacceptable. “Up to the present,” he wrote in 1888, “the assault against Christianity has not only been fainthearted, it has been wide of the mark.”

So long as Christian ethics are not felt to be a capital crime against life, their defenders will have the game in their hands. The problem of the ‘truth’ of Christianity – the existence of its God or the historicity of its legend, to say nothing of its astronomy and its natural science – is in itself a very subsidiary problem so long as the value of Christian ethics goes unquestioned.³³

The Christian ethics uppermost in Nietzsche’s mind, of course, was Christianity’s concern for victims, but the logic of his attack applies even more to Christian sexual ethics, and the day would come – as it has – when the former ethic would be used to destroy the latter one, with

³² Sergei S. Averintsev, “Marriage and Family: An Untimely Essay,” *Communio: International Catholic Journal*, Vol. XXX, Num. 4, winter, 2004.

³³ Quoted: Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 115.

hardly anyone realizing that it is Christian faith itself that is under attack. For, its moral benefits aside, Christianity's sexual ethic serves far more than just a moral purpose: it fosters the self-gathering and self-discipline which are the preconditions for the sacramental and ontologically altering "one-flesh" mystery of nuptiality. The key to Christian life is committed, covenantal self-donation, and the deepest experiences of self-donation are almost inevitably nuptial in nature – whether that nuptiality takes a conjugal or a celibate form, and the paramount spiritual purpose of Christian sexual ethics is to foster these forms of nuptial self-donation. Dispense with Christianity's sexual ethic, and the mystery of nuptiality will be lost, as the recent history of Western culture has shown beyond a shadow of a doubt, and that loss will be but a harbinger and a herald of the demise of Christianity itself, as is now becoming clear. Nietzsche and his unwitting heirs deserve credit for intuiting that the most effective way to rid a culture of Christian influence is to neutralize the ethic that makes lived Christian experience possible. Nor, however, does this mean that Nietzsche's goal of ridding the world of Christianity is entirely succeeding, for the attack on Christianity's sexual ethic is today being driven by a perverted form of the empathy for victims which Christianity itself bequeathed to the world.

The empathy for victims which Christianity fosters functions to expose and deconstruct the mythic and ritual apparatus of the old sacred system. If that is all it does, Nietzsche's reproaches are perfectly valid, for the effect would be to condemn the world to the violent ravages that the old sacred system existed to ward off. In place of the primitive sacred, however, Christianity fosters what Catholicism unabashedly calls the sacramental: namely, the subtle but nonetheless ontologically substantiating and genuinely liberating processes of conversion, the effect of which is the simultaneous development of interiority, relationality, and genuine rationality – as contrasted with desiccated forms of rationalism that regard the Paschal source of true rationality as superstition. The source and archetype of this conversion process, as John Paul II has so vigorously argued, is humanity's primordial sacrament, the conjugal love between a man and a woman, through which, under the proper circumstances, the mystery of nuptial self-donation – the Christian mystery as such – is experienced.

Christianity, at its core, is about living a life of loving and committed self-donation. Most people experience this mystery in the first instance as recipients of maternal love, and in later life in relationships of nuptial fidelity. These relationships are made possible in large part by a moral theology that both fosters and informs them, channeling and disciplining sexual appetite and erotic emotion which, if squandered frustrate rather than foster the intimacy toward which they

are naturally ordered. What Nietzsche knew intuitively, and what his contemporary heirs seem to understand without having read a page of his ravings, is that dismantling the ethical principles that make it possible for people to have a lived experience of Christian truth is more lethal to Christian faith than would be a direct assault on the creed in which that faith is enshrined.

FAUSTIAN GAMBLE

In a desperate effort to compensate for the loss of deeper meaning – the failure to “situate the phenomenon of sexuality within a total interpretation of being” – sexual experimentation inevitably becomes the order of the day, technique and titillation replacing genuine self-donation. As the accompanying tedium has grown, post-Christian culture has turned itself into a social laboratory for experimenting in non-traditional sexual and moral arrangements, and the result is as disconcerting as is the studied inattention it continues to receive from those afraid of appearing insufficiently progressive.

Prominent National Gay and Lesbian Task Force policy director, Paula Ettelbrick, once opposed gay marriage on the grounds that it capitulated to a social convention which serious homosexual activists, she felt, should forthrightly reject. “Being queer,” she insisted, “means pushing the parameters of sex and family, and in the process transforming the very fabric of society.” The proper aim of homosexual activists, Ettelbrick stressed, was state-recognized polyamory.³⁴ The effect, and for many the underlying purpose, of the movement to recognize polyamory is, as Ms. Ettelbrick puts it, to “radically reorder society’s view of the family.” Hers is far from an isolated voice. “By ceasing to conceive of marriage as a partnership composed of one person of each sex,” writes University of Michigan law professor, David Chambers, “the state may become more receptive to units of three or more,” concluding that: “All desirable changes in family law need not be made at once.”³⁵

We have entered into a Faustian gamble, wagering our health – mental, social, moral and physical – and our happiness on a sexual mythology which only the Marquis de Sades, Alfred Kinseys, and Michel Foucaults of the world could have found truly plausible. Hope today is less and less likely to spring eternal, but naïveté still does. Those who think that with one or two more concessions the revolutionaries will be satisfied have not been paying attention, as is

³⁴ I thought my spellchecker was properly attuned to the times when it recognized the word “transsexual,” a word, by the way, nowhere to be found in the 1981 O.E.D. Here, alas, my spellchecker failed me. As yet “polyamory” is not a word it recognizes, an oversight no doubt being rectified at this moment.

³⁵ These citations, and many more just as astonishing, are from a lengthy piece by Stanley Kurtz, a scholar at the Stanford University Hoover Institute, published in *The Weekly Standard*, 08/04/2003, Volume 008, Issue 45.

suggested by an article that appeared in the April 22, 2004 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle:

Unitarians from Boston to Berkeley have opened another front in the liberal crusade to expand the definition of marriage and family in America.

It's the new polygamy, and according to the Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness, their relationships are at least as ethical as other marriages – gay or straight.

"Polyamory is never having to say you've broken up," said Sally Amsbury of Oakland, whose sex and love life openly includes her husband and two "other significant others," known in polyamory parlance as "OSOs." ...

Amsbury is bisexual, her husband of two years is heterosexual, and her current "other significant others" are bisexual.

One of them, Peter, lives in West Hollywood with his boyfriend. The other one, Conly, lives in Santa Rosa and has been her lover for seven years.

"I wear a wedding ring for my husband," she explained, "and a bracelet for Conly."

Though Amsbury and her husband, Terrance Roff, did not involve Peter and Conly in their Alameda marriage ceremony, other polyamorous Unitarians have proposed church ceremonies to bless threesomes, foursomes or moresomes. ...

"Some people in polyamory are bi, some are homosexual, some are heterosexual. We are serving their needs," said Barb Greve, a transgender person who likes to be called "he."

Greve is a program associate with the Association of Unitarian Universalists' Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns in Boston

"There are people who want to be in committed relationships – whether it's heterosexual marriage, same-sex marriage or polyamory – and that should be acknowledged religiously and legally," he said.

The biological logic of traditional marriage is that it takes a man and a woman to conceive a child, and its social logic is that it takes a mother and a father to raise one. Once marriage is defined without reference to these things, then there is no longer a logically defensible definition which will withstand legal challenge. The logic of the "rights" argument is relentless in this regard. As Eric Gans has noted:

The gay couple's argument that it is unfair that a heterosexual couple, but not they, should be eligible for the legal benefits of marriage can be turned against both sets of couples: why should a man or woman be forced to join with someone else in order to receive social benefits? Why should those who like to live in couples have an advantage over those who like to live singly? Polygamists may well ask how what is given to groups of

two can be denied to groups of ten. But the more fundamental question is: why deny it to groups of one? How can our society justify denying the equal rights of the uncoupled?³⁶

Not only will the ability to define marriage be lost, however, but, even more alarmingly, the vastly expanded repertoire of canonized forms of coupling will forthwith be declared to be of equal moral and social significance, none more socially privileged in any way than the others, and each immune to moral criticism of any sort. Even acts that are obviously and objectively abnormal and unnatural will, according to this implacable logic, be made the moral equivalent of Norman Rockwell family life. Surviving members of the *ancien régime* may be left to side of the juggernaut, but their children will be carefully disabused of the retrograde ideas of their elders. This is predictable, not just on the clear evidence of what has happened to date, but because it is built into the logic of “rights,” as Eric Gans has pointed out, and the logic of tolerance and non-discrimination. Morality is discriminatory; that’s why it exists. In the brave new world where desire is self-validating, no such moral discrimination will be allowed, at least in area of sexuality, and the failure to espouse each and every sexual option as equal in every way to every other such option will be an unacceptable, and very likely legally actionable, discriminatory act. Is Robert Gagnon being an alarmist when, with supporting data for almost every item he mentions, he foresees something a lot less comforting than inclusion?

At stake are such things as: mandatory indoctrination of our children in all school systems, public and accredited private, from kindergarten on, through convocations, skits, videos, workshops, and teacher instruction; loss of one’s job if one does not sign a statement saying that one “values sexual orientation differences”; mandatory workplace attendance of “Gay Pride” events and “Coming Out” celebrations; fines and even imprisonment for speaking out against homosexual practice, even in church services; having one’s children taken out of one’s own home for teaching “homophobic” ideas or, if one’s child professes a homoerotic proclivity, for “child abuse”; loss of accreditation of all Christian colleges and even seminaries that cannot prove “non-discrimination” in the hiring practices towards “gays and lesbians” or that permit any faculty to speak or publish in a manner critical of homosexual behavior per se; and refusal of colleges and universities to admit any students who do not sign statements affirming the value of homoerotic relationships.³⁷

Thus the moral triumph of tolerance over every other virtue ends in intolerance, an intolerance precisely for the moral foundations of the religious tradition that inspired the ethic of tolerance in the first place. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that the world is full of good Christian virtues gone mad. This is the one gone mad today.

³⁶ Chronicles of Love and Resentment, #296.

³⁷ <http://www.robgagnon.net/>

Are Princeton University law professor Robert P. George and Harvard University law professor Mary Ann Glendon succumbing to homophobic hysteria when they warn of the constraints on the public expression of traditional morality that seem certain to follow from the logic of the legal arguments used to challenge to traditional marriage? “Gay-marriage proponents use the language of openness, tolerance and diversity,” writes Glendon, “one foreseeable effect of their success will be to usher in an era of intolerance and discrimination the likes of which we have rarely seen before.”

Every person and every religion that disagrees will be labeled as bigoted and openly discriminated against. The ax will fall most heavily on religious persons and groups that don't go along. Religious institutions will be hit with lawsuits if they refuse to compromise their principles.³⁸

It is entirely conceivable that ten years from now it will be considered an indictable hate-crime to publicly affirm the sexual morality Jews and Christians have held in common for thousands of years. In a few short years those who publicly dissent from the idea that traditional marriage and homosexual coupling are morally and legally indistinguishable may pay a very steep price for doing so.

NOTHING IS GIVEN, ALL IS FASHIONABLE

When we say that something is fashionable, we ordinarily mean that it enjoys a evanescent popularity; but the word also refers to that which can be fashioned according to the will of one determined to fashion it. Increasingly today, everything is fashionable in this sense. Much of what those who went before us regarded as *given*, we regard as raw fashion-able material to be shaped according to our sovereign wills, which is to say, according to our desires, which is to say according to other people's desires. Nothing is exempt, nothing *given*, life is no longer a gift, everything is fashion-able. “For post-Kantian voluntarism nature becomes the *enemy* of freedom,” writes Aidan Nichols, O.P. “No longer the nurturing, if also at times demanding and perilous, mother, nature becomes a straight-jacket that would paralyze.”³⁹ Under the spell of this logic, freedom comes to be redefined as willfulness unencumbered by anything exterior to desire itself; it's arch enemy: whatever a humbler age might have regarded as *given*. The result is the idea of freedom as what one chooses and nature as what one desires, a recipe for moral anarchy of the sort that will lead inevitably to social anarchy. Astonishingly, the U.S.

³⁸ Mary Ann Glendon, “For Better or for Worse,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 25, 2004.

³⁹ Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Christendom Awake!*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 55.

Supreme Court, in the *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision in 1992, enshrined precisely this madness in judicial precedent. “At the heart of liberty,” Justice Kenney wrote for the Court majority, “is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”⁴⁰ John Paul II brings us back to earth, exorcizing as he does the Gnostic spirit lurking behind all this:

A freedom which claims to be absolute ends up treating the human body as a raw datum, devoid of any meaning and moral values until freedom has shaped it in accordance with its design. Consequently, human nature and the body appear as *presuppositions or preambles*, materially *necessary* for freedom to make its choice, yet extrinsic to the person, the subject and the human act. Their functions would not be able to constitute reference points for moral decisions⁴¹

These forebodings, and those of George, Glendon, Gagnon and others, seem less exaggerated in the light of statements made in unguarded moments by those mapping the revolution. In a recent interview, for instance, Matt Foreman, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, D.C. acknowledged that the work of dismantling the moral principles Jews and Christians have held for millennia was just beginning.

I’m also interested in going after, politically, local legislators and leaders that have launched these anti-gay initiatives. “We beat you, now we’re gonna go back and we’re going to affirmatively punish you” – people who launch this stuff, so that they understand not only that they’re not going to win, but that there are consequences to it. We would set up a PAC and go in and terrify them with a credible challenge. ... So we go in, for a modest investment of money, and torture these people, which would give me endless satisfaction. And the word would go out very quickly, “You know what, this really isn’t worth it.” ... We want full equality under the law, which, right now, means the freedom to marry. But we’re also hopeful that we create different ways in which people can form relationships and families that don’t come with all the baggage and the downsides of marriage. One of the great things about where we’re going is that we are creating new ways for people to relate, new ways for people to obtain rights and benefits.⁴²

The historian Jacques Barzun alludes to the anthropological blunder that underlies so many of our moral problems today when he speaks of the emergence in the West of the “demotic individual,” who is consumed by an insatiable desire for an unconditioned life, a life free from constraints – be they legal, moral, or physical – and free as well from the consequences of his own behavior and his own choices. This unconditioned life, this chimerical dream of

⁴⁰ *Casey vs. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania*, 112 Sup. Ct. 2791, at 2807.

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §48.

⁴² *Between The Lines Newspaper*, From issue number 1218, April 29, 2004.

occidental postmodernists, writes Barzun, “was something different from enjoying rights and decent treatment from one’s fellows. It was to act as if nothing stood in the way of every wish.” In pursuit of this fantastic dream of uninhibited desire, this emboldened demotic creature, writes Barzun, “expects no rebuffs and overlooks those it provokes.”⁴³ This is the spirit of our age. When desire and reality conflict, reality must be altered.

AVOIDING SCANDALOUS LANGUAGE

The first definition for the word “sodomy” in the Encarta Dictionary is, “an offensive term for anal intercourse.” Indeed it is an offensive term, used since biblical times to accuse and condemn, to incite moral revulsion, the stuff of demagogues and scapegoaters. The term has a dark and ugly past. But if its elimination has the effect of removing from our imaginations the act of male homosexual intercourse, whose moral equivalence to the nuptial act of a man and a woman is now being asserted, then its elimination can only be justified if there can be found another term, less offensive, that nevertheless conjures in the mind the act whose moral equivalence to conjugal intercourse is now being debated. “But what do they really *do*?” asked the social philosopher, Sidney Hook. This would be a prurient concern were it not for the fact that “what they do” is being proposed for cultural canonization. Replacing the offensive and pejorative references to male homosexuality, for instance, with the word “gay” can hardly be justified as more descriptive, nor of course was it intended to be. Neither the vague term “sexual orientation,” so seemingly appropriate and yet so devoid of concrete significance, nor the sundry political anodynes about rights and inclusion, throw any real light on exactly what acts are being proposed as morally, legally, and socially equal to the conjugal act of marriage. Only by having a clearer image in our minds of what these acts are can the issues now before Western culture be given a full and fair hearing. We are not talking about hand-holding, after all, or a peck on the cheek. The love that dares not speak its name needs one.

We simply cannot have it both ways. We cannot celebrate the “gay lifestyle” while averting the glance of heterosexuals from sexual acts on the virtues of which their public school children will soon be instructed, their grade point average determined in part by the alacrity with which they recognize the moral and legal indistinguishability of these acts from married love between a man and a woman. The ostensibly inoffensive nature of homosexual sex is precisely what is being asserted by some and called into question by others. To refuse for reasons

⁴³ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 781.

of discretion or sensitivity to contemplate these behaviors with a degree of concrete specificity hardly seems appropriate to the gravity of the social revolution their canonization will occasion.

Discretion is, and should be, the watchword. The privacy argument is over used, no doubt, but it is an understatement to say that a voyeuristic interest in the private sexual behavior of others is unwarranted. But those unsatisfied with social tolerance of this sort, and who are willing to dismantle the oldest human institution in a doomed effort to extinguish moral misgivings in themselves and others about homosexual behavior, have an obligation, it seems to me, to be more forthcoming about what exactly it is that is being proposed as the moral and legal equivalent of marriage. “It reveals a false notion of friendship,” writes the constitutional scholar Hadley Arkes, “to suggest that love is placed on a deeper plane when it is attended by forms of copulation that we are even embarrassed to mention.”⁴⁴

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS SEXUAL PERVERSION?

Decades ago, the sexual liberationists raised high the banner of nature. “Why is everyone so solemn and uptight about sexuality,” they complained. “It’s only natural.” What was natural was, of course, good. If the concept of “nature” did not explicitly replace God, it functioned similarly. What was natural was not only legitimate, it was, for all intents and purposes, mandatory. “Those who restrain desire,” William Blake taught us, “do so because theirs is weak enough to be retrained.”⁴⁵ Desire, it was assumed, was a synonym for nature. In the early years of the revolution, simple sound-byte doses of Freud seasoned all discourse, and virtually every undergraduate was propagandized in a required course in the sexual wishful thinking of Margaret Mead, for which, unsurprisingly, undergraduates showed considerable enthusiasm. Restraining nature in any way was, well, an unnatural act, an offense against nature. But then Alfred Kinsey came along to provide new yeast for the brew, and his now thoroughly discredited work – warmly embraced at the time by the most prestigious institutions, universities, and philanthropic foundations – made it clear that what was *really* natural was the *unnatural*: homosexuality, incest, sado-masochism, and so on. It was the missionary position that came under suspicion, the snicker all the more delicious because of the Christian innuendo. With the normalization of the abnormal came the abnormalization of celibacy, chastity, and virginity. Blake again was harbinger, condemning “pale religious lechery” that gives the name virginity to one who “wishes

⁴⁴ Hadley Arkes, “Homosexuality and the Law,” *Homosexuality and American Public Life*, Ed. Christopher Wolfe, (Dallas, TX.: Spence Publishing, 1999), 157.

⁴⁵ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

but acts not.”⁴⁶ All of this is now the stuff of late night television and the canned laughter of McSex sitcoms. Today celibacy (and even pre-marital abstinence) is derided as ridiculously unnatural by people for whom each and every homosexual act is the moral equivalent of Rosa Parks’ challenge to the Montgomery, Alabama status quo, and the unhampered access of teenagers to abortion the *sine qua non* of Western social progress.

Earlier this year a Swedish television station reported that a Swedish veterinarian organization had evidence showing that the incidence of “sex” between humans and animals was rising sharply. The increase, the organization concluded, began in 1999 when Sweden apparently stumbled upon the novel idea of outlawing child pornography. Why mention such a thing? Well, in order to conduct a thought experiment. The question it begs is: Does the phrase “sexual perversion” have any meaning today? Is there such a thing? Is the only rationale for objecting to “sex” between humans and animals an animal rights objection? Has the adjective in the phrase “sexual perversion” grown so sacrosanct that the noun has disappeared behind the shimmering aureole of its radiance? Is there a stopping point beyond which the ever-expanding envelope will not go? Is there a point at which the phrase sexual perversion will return to use? Have we become so averse to the idea of perversion that we only use it when the act in question is either coerced or involves a minor? Is group “sex” a perversion? Is adult incest a perversion? Is sodomy a perversion? If not, do we any longer have use for this word?

“If the ‘natural’ denotes simply the desires some people consistently have, the whole bewildering variety of such desires that exists in our world, we will lose our grip on norms entirely,” wrote Gilbert Meilaender.

Indeed, that notion of the natural is incompatible with any understanding of ethics or moral law, for it has no standard by which to judge or evaluate the desires that come “naturally” to us. Then we very quickly find ourselves without the conceptual resources needed to speak ethically about incest, bestiality, and adultery.⁴⁷

Nor, argues Meilaender, should we “permit the church’s public teaching, on the matter of homosexuality or any other matter, to be taken over and determined by a desire – however sincere and well-intentioned – to ‘affirm’ every person in whatever state he or she may be.” This, Meilaender insists, “is not the gospel.”⁴⁸ No, but it is, as Chesterton more or less noted, the Gospel gone mad.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Gilbert Meilaender, “The First Institutions,” *Pro Ecclesia*, (Vol. VI, No. 4, 1997).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

If desire itself becomes normative; if all norms must undergo a perpetual and incessant readjustment to popular desire – or even individual desire – then norms simply cease to exist, for, as students of René Girard should surely know, desire is both infinite and infinitely protean. To let the moral gold standard float in relation to so fickle a thing as desire is to bequeath our children a moral chaos far greater even than the one in which we live.

In ancient Egypt there were god-kings; some of Rome's emperors declared themselves divine; in many archaic cultures, the shaman in ritual attire becomes a snake, a leopard, or a bear. Most people in ancient Egypt, ancient Rome and archaic cultures probably believed their rulers to be gods and their shamans to be leopards or snakes. Were you and I to walk among them, we might find a few people who knew otherwise, but they would almost surely speak of their heterodox beliefs in hushed tones, so as not to have their piety called into question. But you and I would know that the Pharaoh was not a god, Caesar not a god, the shaman not a raven. The British Parliament appears prepared to pass later this year *The Gender Recognition Bill*, under which it will be possible for someone to apply to have his or her gender officially and legally declared to be other than what the person's body – unless surgically altered – clearly indicates. Upon completion of the proper forms, that person will be able to walk out of the government office legally empowered to oblige society to treat him/her, not in a manner appropriate to the body he/she has had since birth, but as someone of the opposite gender. What effect will such legislation have? Will the truth be relegated to the hushed tones of those whose dubious piety might be espied by the authorities if they spoke it aloud? Professor Michael Pakaluk was no doubt being less sensitive than one ought to be when he put it the way he did, but what he says about same-sex marriage is relevant to the Gender Recognition Bill and to a great many other things today: "Really, the only healthy reaction to the idea of same-sex marriage," Pakaluk writes, "would be a kind of chuckle at the absurdity of it, and an internal resolve to ignore, as though nothing at all, both this fiction and anything any government might say in support of it."⁴⁹

THE RESTORATION OF DIGNITY

If erotic desire – regardless of whether it is heterosexual or homosexual – is morally self-validating, then why isn't promiscuous desire or adulterous desire or incestuous desire likewise self-validating? Why isn't the desire for revenge, every bit as powerful as sexual desire, equally

⁴⁹ Michael Pakaluk, "Homosexuality and the Common Good," *Homosexuality and American Public Life*, Ed. Christopher Wolfe, (Dallas, TX.: Spence Publishing, 1999), 189.

self-validating? Paul and the other New Testament writers routinely warned of bad or evil or immoral desires. To say, as some do, or imply, as others do, that desires are unambiguously valorized in Christianity involves a massive misreading of the New Testament and a glaring departure from the rigors of Girardian thought. Live by the Spirit, Paul admonished the Galatians, “and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh, for the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want” (Gal. 5:16-17). If the “flesh has desires against the spirit,” surely these are desires that cannot be perfected by grace. On the contrary, these desires, being against the Spirit, will lead to dis-grace, that is to say, to the loss of dignity.

If this paper has a goal other than that of truth-telling, it is to argue for the restoration of dignity in the only way it can be restored, that is to say, the hard way: by acts of moral reclamation that require social courage and self-sacrifice. For it *is* dignity that is at stake. On this I heartily agree with those who have given that name to a prominent organization calling for the elimination of all moral misgivings about homosexual behavior – an impossible dream. The question is: What is the root cause of the shame, indignity and disgrace that such an organization strives to relieve? Is the lost dignity due to the lack of social approval or legal recognition? I think not. We live in a culture that has lost its dignity. Vulgarity and venality are the order of the day. The crude and the shocking close in on us from every side. The loss of dignity we experience has very little to do with being treated disrespectfully by others. Rather, it is the result of our repudiation of moral standards which fostered the self-discipline and moral intelligence with the help of which it was possible for our forbearers to live dignified lives.

Today it is widely assumed that by eliminating the legal and moral distinction between traditional marriage and homosexual unions the indignity from which sexually active homosexuals suffer will disappear. Misguided as it is, this approach is not without precedent. The anthropological corollary to the venerable axiom that sin destroys the consciousness of sin is that the betrayal of one’s own nature cuts one off from the source of moral intelligence. One can, to use Pauline language, be “delivered over” to passions that are both personally intoxicating and socially toxic. In such cases, efforts to alleviate the accompanying moral misgivings and sense of indignity take a predictable course, as Dante noted in his treatment of the libertine Assyrian Queen:

Her vice of lust became so customary
that she made license licit in her laws
to free her from the scandal she had caused. (*Inferno*, V: 55-57)

Experience has shown, however, that the loss of dignity is easier to eliminate from one's consciousness than from one's conscience. "Who told you you were naked?" the Lord asked Adam. The answer: no one. Whether or not the Torah has yet to be written on our hearts, the natural law is, and its violation impinges on conscience, like it or not. In addition to whatever indignity I may suffer at the hands of others, there is the indignity I feel when I lose my dignity through my own fault. Indignity of this latter kind will survive each and every attempt to alleviate it by social or political means. If the North American Man-Boy Love Association has its way and pedophilia is given a respectable place in the erotic repertoire of 21st century culture, or if adult incest is afforded legal protection, does anyone think that the moral discomfort that haunts those who engage in such behaviors will vanish? There isn't a plebiscite in the world that will remove that moral discomfort. Not a Supreme Court opinion. Not a personal letter from the Pope. Nothing. Except, cessation of the unnatural behavior. Dignity is a moral, not a psychological or sociological, category. The dream of some is that, liberated from moral normativity, both social opprobrium of those offended by certain behaviors and the lingering moral misgivings of those who engage in them will vanish. It is a dream that simply will not and cannot come true.

Whatever a person's emotional, psychological and affective situation might be – and whatever the various factors that have contributed to that situation – everyone's gender, at the concrete level of the body, is unambiguous and irreducible. At this all important level of the body, which once upon a time seemed to be of genuine interest to the sexual liberationists, each of us is either male or female. If there is any ambiguity, it is not (except in exceedingly rare and obviously tragic cases) an anatomical one. The incongruity in someone suffering from same-sex attraction between bodily gender and emotional affect and desire can be attributed to the body or to the desires. Is it the desires that are out of sync with the body or the body which is out of sync with the desires? The idea that same sex attraction is a problem of inhabiting the wrong body is a conspicuously Gnostic idea. A more realistic approach would be to regard one's desires as being objectively disordered with respect to one's corporeal embodiment. Whatever accommodation might need to be made between the concrete datum of one's gender and one's

more volatile and mimetically influenced psychological, emotional and affective situation, the former and not the latter is the better basis on which to try to bring about that accommodation.

While acknowledging the likelihood that the number of people suffering from homosexual attractions because of a genetic inheritance over which they have no control is – to borrow a term from the Catholic Catechism – “not negligible,” Girard has cautioned that the role of mimesis should not be overlooked. Whatever the inherited predisposition, however, it is usually not conclusively determining of sexual orientation, and most certainly not conclusive with regard to either identity or behavior. Nor should the fact of genetic inheritance be construed to mean that homosexual attraction is natural. A predisposition for depression or alcoholism or chemical dependency does not make these things natural, in the sense of being thereby exempt from either moral concern or therapeutic efforts to offset the effects of the inherited predisposition. The etiology of other things that are intrinsically disordered – like bulimia, anorexia and pedophilia – is uncertain and complex, but few people think it inappropriate to discourage bulimics, anorexics and pedophiles from trying to satisfy their desires. Today, however, same-sex desires are being exempted from any such social, cultural, or moral reservations.

In any case, and in the interest of moral and anthropological realism, let it be said that a radical inconsistency between the body and one’s “sexual orientation” will unavoidably be the source of suffering and pain, inasmuch as a smooth and unproblematic accommodation between them may simply not be possible. The question is whether whatever suffering this inconsistency involves will be endured with dignity or compounded by the loss of it. Let me conclude, therefore, with a reflection on the restoration of dignity, the lack of which is explicitly decried by homosexual activists and implicitly at work in the lingering moral and psychological distresses suffered by post-abortion women.

The dignity for which sexually active homosexuals rightly long simply cannot be restored by the political, legal and religious institutions to which they are today appealing for its restoration. While very significant concessions have been made, and rightly so, in an effort to alleviate unjust discrimination, the demand for concessions aimed at restoring dignity has become more and more shrill. The dignity of which many homosexuals feel deprived is lost when attempts are made to sexually consummate relationships which cannot be sexually consummated, and which are placed in added jeopardy by the attempt to do what cannot be done. The truth that sets us free is the truth that restores our dignity, and it is often a hard truth, a narrow way.

Not rarely, it is a personally and socially costly one. The greater its liberating power, the heavier the cross one must sometimes carry on the way to liberation, but bearing that burden is the royal road to the restoration of personal dignity. Those sexually attracted to persons of the same sex – like those born with physical handicaps – will carry a heavier cross through life than those without these conditions. In neither case, can the inequity be eliminated. The essential choice is between carrying that burden with dignity or relinquishing one's dignity in a doomed attempt to avoid the suffering. Pretending otherwise will not change the situation, and it will very likely make it far worse.

To speak of sexual consummation is to speak of human relationships. Animals copulate and reproduce, but they do not experience “sexual consummation.” Nor is sexual consummation a synonym for mutual orgasm or sexual release. What is consummated when sexual consummation is experienced is a relationship, not an episode of sexual arousal. The referent is always a human relationship, and, as such, a spiritual, rather than a merely instinctual or biological one. It would be ludicrous to speak of the sexual consummation of the encounter between a rapist and his victim, or of a pedophile and his. The act of masturbation does not result in sexual consummation. It would be improper and misleading to speak of the sexual consummation of an incestuous relationship or of an adulterous one. To pretend otherwise is to ignore the very subtle but very profound reality concerning the specifically human mystery of the conjugal union. Homosexual relationships, however loving and meaningful and admirable, cannot be sexually consummated, regardless of how physically gratifying and even emotionally profound they may be.

The inability to consummate homosexual relationships *sexually* is due to the handicap from which these relationships suffer – lacking, as they do, both biological generativity and sexual complementarity. Grace perfects nature, and, whatever else might be said of homoerotic sexuality, it is not natural in any serious sense of the term. The desire that *can* be perfected by grace, however – the desire that is, in fact, ultimately perfectible by grace – is the desire for communion, the desire for love and companionship. It is the desire for communion that endows any specifically human sexual attraction with its spiritual meaning, whether the attraction is heterosexual or homosexual.

Moral standards should have as their ultimate purpose, not merely the maintenance of public morality and social order – though these are necessary and legitimate goals – but, above and beyond that, the fostering of loving and lasting bonds of genuine, honest, and trusting

intimacy toward which humans are ultimately ordered. It is the longing for communion – and not the desire for orgasmic gratification with which it is often confused in our world today – that must be privileged and protected. Where the two things – orgasmic gratification, on one hand, and deep, loving, and lasting relationships, on the other – come into conflict, priority should go to the latter, at the expense of the former if need be, *regardless of whether the relationship in question is between a man and a woman or between people of the same sex*. Only when the gratification of sexual desire is compatible with the spiritual longing that underlies it, and only under the circumstances that make it compatible, is nature perfected by grace. It is a hard truth, but a truth nonetheless, that the circumstances that make sexual gratification and the *communio* experience compatible are both physiological and covenantal. They include both gender complementarity and the promise of exclusive fidelity.

There is, therefore, a world of difference between a sexually pleasurable orgasm and the sexual consummation of nuptial intimacy. Not only is the former no substitute for the latter, it is often a lonely and alienating parody of it.⁵⁰ Whether driven by homosexual or heterosexual desire, the attempt to sexually consummate a relationship that is inherently unsuited to sexual consummation exacts a spiritual toll. Of the relationships that are incapable of being fully consummated sexually, the vast majority are heterosexual. What renders these relationships unsuitable for sexual consummation in the full nuptial sense may be the absence of love or fidelity or the presence of lust or self-gratification and so on, but they are just as incapable of sexual consummation as are relationships lacking in gender complementary. The attempt to consummate sexually relationships that cannot be so consummated fails, but, worst of all, the failure can, and often does, seriously damage or even destroy the ability to consummate the deeper longing that *can* be consummated, namely, the longing for loving and lasting communion. A chaste life, a virginal life, a celibate life, a life without sexual intercourse can be a full and richly rewarding life. A life without what the Catholic tradition calls the *communio personarum*, however, is a truly tragic life, and those who espouse lifestyles – whether heterosexual or homosexual – that jeopardize the capacity to experience such a *communio* at its deepest level further burden those whose burdens they are trying to lift.

My sense is that the number of men today who love other men in a deep and meaningful way, and the number of women who love other women so, and who, in each case, are in no

⁵⁰ For a poetic depiction of this alienation in its heterosexual form, see, for example: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and the sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

way attracted to the one they love sexually, is vastly greater than the number of sexually active homosexuals. There was a day when men and women could express their love for someone of their own gender without fear that he or she would interpret such their gesture in an overly sexual way or that others might read into it a sexual innuendo which was not intended. Sadly, those days are gone, and the world is a poorer place for their passing. Today relationships in general are over-sexualized, and that, in my view, is a sign of the decline of real relationality in our lives and in our world, the eroticizing of relationships being a clumsy and inappropriate way to make up for their diminishing spiritual intensity. If this is true, and to the extent that it is, the old adage applies: you never get enough of what you really don't want. Everywhere one looks today, one sees ever more desperate and undignified efforts to find access via sexuality to a mystery from which the desperate and the undignified are self-disqualified.

The absence of dignity, and the corresponding indignity that is a source of discomfort to sexually active homosexuals – and to adulterous, promiscuous heterosexuals – can be ameliorated to some degree by the understanding and compassion of others, but that indignity will not be fully eliminated by legislative or judicial fiat. This sense of indignity is rooted in moral ambiguities that arise, not because of the laws of the state, but because of the law written on the heart, the natural law. Efforts to rectify this sense of indignity by dismantling traditional morality, deconstructing gender, and redefining marriage will simply fail. That is to say, they will fail to eliminate the sense of indignity. They may succeed all too well in destroying the social and moral foundations of Western civilization, especially as the indignity that persists in spite of the legal and social accommodations turns to indignation, exasperating and accelerating the crisis of which it is a symptom. In that case, after all the social furniture has been wrecked and thrown into the fire, and as the embers die away, the world will be immensely colder and harsher than before. In that garish twilight, the residual sense of indignity will be far worse, for there will then be left nothing external on which it might plausibly be blamed.

* * * * *

Some have suggested – explicitly or implicitly – that homosexuals (being the latest to wear the mantle of victim) will save the culture or the Church. As preposterous as this is at one level, there is something to it. The Dorian Grays of the sexual revolution pretend to be reassured by the studied exuberance of their no longer youthful recruits, but few are really convinced. In today's world, on the other hand, nothing is more daring and prophetic than the example of those who have opted out of this shabby charade, witnessing with their lives to the real nature

and meaning of intimacy, about which the young have been kept almost completely in the dark for a generation or more. Whether one witnesses to this neglected mystery inconspicuously, by remaining a loyal friend and a faithful spouse, or more arduously, nobly and prophetically, by living a life of vowed celibacy, principled virginity, or dignified chastity – it is, in the final analysis, such lives as these that will save our culture and the Church from succumbing to the spirit of this age. The heavier the burden borne by those who live such lives, and the greater the temptations renounced in doing so, the more grace they will receive, the more ennobling will be their experience, and the more edifying their example.

The restoration of human dignity is one of the greatest needs of our time, so undignified have we allowed our lives and our age to become, but the restoration of dignity will require, as it always has, courage, character, chastity, fidelity and self-sacrifice – virtues that have been culturally mocked for most of the last century, but without which we simply cannot live dignified lives.

It is truth that sets us free. Not sympathy, not kindness, not inclusion, not sensitivity, not all the other good and worthwhile virtues we should all strive to practice. To the extent that any or all of these virtues avoid the question of truth, they will do nothing to effect real liberation, for the source of real liberation is truth. The spirit of this age and the ideological specifications of that spirit, like the archaic myths they replaced, exist to obscure the truth. Our first task, therefore, will always be to free ourselves from the spell of these things. As to where to go to get free of them, there's no better suggestion than the one that appeared in a recent press account of a large rally at the University of Washington in favor of retaining the traditional definition of marriage. Despite the efforts of conference organizers to set a non-confrontational tone, such rallies are almost unavoidably adversarial, as are essays like the foregoing. So it was appropriate at the end of the Seattle rally, as it is appropriate at the end of this essay, for those on the podium and those in attendance to be reminded that: "At the foot of the cross, the ground is level."

With apologies for any offense I've given,
Gil Bailie

APPENDIX:

“And down came baby, cradle and all.”

Feminine Wisdom from the Beginning

“My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.”

Seamus Heaney

The feminine figure of wisdom (*chokmah* in Hebrew, and *sophia* in Greek) has its biblical headwaters in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. How this figure found her way into the biblical world remains a bit of a mystery, but it is very likely that she was, so to speak, a literary convert from Hellenistic paganism assimilated by Diaspora Jews in post-exilic times. From these modest and unclear beginnings, she has had a long and colorful life in both Jewish and Christian thought. The scriptural references are few and inconclusive, but, for all that, they are bold, placing this feminine wisdom figure at “the beginning.” The pagan origins of this figure made the Jewish assimilation of her a bit tenuous, and it was with ease that the Gnostics were able to weave the scriptural references to her back into a pagan shape. Even as this was happening, the Church was pulling in another direction, toward a pneumatological interpretation. In recent years, feminist scholars have made considerable use of the Sophia tradition. None of this really concerns me, nor is it particularly pertinent to the proposed interpretation I would like to offer. So out of step with contemporary exegetical procedures is my approach and my proposal, it might be best to call it a midrash, the term often implying less reliance on the technical procedures of historical critical method and so on.

Though I might gather some corroborating texts, I will choose only one, for the burden of my interpretation depends, not on texts in which Diaspora Jews incorporated the Greek idea into biblical thought, but on how it might be further and more meaningfully assimilated by Christian thought. Let the following text suffice:

For he who finds me finds life,
and wins favor from the LORD;
But he who misses me harms himself;
all who hate me love death. (Proverbs 8:35-36)

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning” (1 Corinthians 1:17) Hellenistic wisdom (*sophia*) is philosophical and speculative, if not overtly Gnostic, whereas biblical wisdom is practical and deployed on a moral, not a philosophical, mission. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says he was sent, “*ouk en sophia logou,*” not to preach the logos or eloquence of *sophia* – that is to say, human wisdom. Instead, he insists on speaking the gospel truth, precisely the truth of the cross. To get at the truly valuable understanding of feminine wisdom, we need to follow this Pauline path. To invoke another of Paul’s quintessential insights, biblical wisdom is never “the wisdom of this age” (1 Corinthians 2:6). The wisdom Paul preaches, “God’s wisdom,” is, in fact, antithetical to the social mechanism that gives birth to the wisdom of this age, and, in doing so, to yet another of the “kingdoms of this world.”

Christians feel competent to read the Old Testament correctly only after reading the New Testament. Similarly, an authentically Christian and robustly non-Gnostic reading of the feminine figure of Wisdom must be deeply christological and persistently incarnational. With Paul, we turn, not to speculation, but to the Cross. The Cross, as Girard’s work has helped us realize, is the truth hidden since the foundation of the world. But the admittedly Hellenized Old Testament texts refer to the feminine figure of wisdom being present at precisely this same beginning. And so, if the Cross is the revelation of that (social and cultural) beginning, what does it tell us about the figure of Wisdom, personified as feminine, who was present there?

Remembering that it is only the Paschal scene that fully reveals the originary one, in retrieving the latter we need to focus more closely on the former. Perhaps we need not only to focus more closely, but to wide lens so that we take in the entire tableau of Golgotha, including the silent mother of the Victim at the foot of the Cross. Does this scene give clues as to the meaning of the feminine wisdom which scripture assures us is there at the beginning? The women present at any “originary scene,” like the women present at the Paschal one, are almost certainly socially marginal and impotent to intervene. Of course, any women present would have been vulnerable to the crowd contagion, but not universally so. In light of what we know about the violent forces that extinguish wisdom and replace it with madness and idolatry, we might reasonably assume that the one whose moral lucidity would prove most resistant to extinction by the social contagion of the crowd would be the mother of the one on whom the violence is falling. In such a case, it would be this silent and anguishing woman who would

represent the tiny flickering flame of truth, of “wisdom from the beginning,” and the Passion Story – which is the Rosetta Stone for all things biblical – provides us with a stunning, Pieta revelation of this figure, the scriptural and iconographic key, I would argue, to an anthropologically intelligible understanding of the figure of feminine wisdom of which scripture says: she was there at the beginning.

If the first *communio* bond that rises to the human level is that for which the instinctive attraction between a man and a woman provides the natural affective impetus, the most tenacious bond and the last to be severed by circumstance is that between the mother and her child. In a crisis-ridden community, the person most likely to resist the social contagion of sacrificial violence is the mother (or sister or close feminine relative) of the victim. As a woman in an archaic society, she will in virtually all cases be both socially marginal and physically impotent to intervene. Regardless of how infected she might become by the social contagion, she will have be endowed by nature (not only her feminine nature, but even more powerfully by her maternal instincts and sensibilities) with empathies for her own child the equal of which will not likely be found in the rest of her community. If anyone manages to remain sufficiently empathetic with the victim to retain lucidity as the crowd goes violently mad, it will be the victim’s mother.

Just as the Passion story in the New Testament provides the unparalleled depiction of the Lamb slain since the foundation of the world, so, I think, does it give us the unsurpassable picture of biblical wisdom as woman, the source of wisdom from the beginning. The scene at the Cross, includes the Pieta Mary, the feminine figure who was there from the foundation of the world, holding the Lamb Slain in her heart if not in her arms. She is the epitome of the mother who is the last hold out against the social contagion of the violent crowd; the votive lamp in the encircling darkness; the silent witness, full of grace, a grace that perfects her maternal nature and that becomes revelatory precisely in the crucible of those social forces that seek most to extinguish it. This suffering and powerless love is the source of wisdom that was there from the beginning. It is not, to quote Paul, “a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age;” it is “God’s wisdom,” mysterious and hidden. And, thanks to the revelation of the cross, and, in this case, the revelation *at* the cross, we have a hint as to where it was hidden: in the broken heart of a mother powerless to prevent the murder of her child.

Scientists have lately been taking note of just how extremely complex the physical requirements for life are and how unimaginably rare, possibly unique in all the universe, are the

subtle convergences that would have to accompany even the most rudimentary emergence of organic life. Analogously, it may be that – in ways that we simply cannot fully comprehend – had the truth (of love) not been preserved in the broken hearts of mothers “from the beginning” – as the place where, as Paul says, the wisdom of God lay hidden – human life and human culture might have perished at birth for lack of it.

Biblical wisdom is not the wisdom of the philosophers. It is the wisdom of the Pieta. It is not the wisdom of this age; it is the wisdom this age always struggles to extinguish. The truth of biblical wisdom is the truth of love, and this is where that truth goes when there’s no place else to go. This is the votive lamp in which the flame of truth was kept hidden but flickering from the beginning. Precarious as this flame is, it survives, when it does, in the sanctuary of a mother’s heart. It is the repository of wisdom and grace in a world gone mad.

It is not, however, completely immune to that madness. The figure of wisdom personified as a woman in biblical literature is, I would argue, the last best hope for the truth that is love in a world grown heartless and insensitive. All the more tragic, therefore, are those stories, ancient and contemporary, that tell of the lamp of feminine wisdom being extinguished either by the raw madness of the mob in heat or by the subtle and sinister cooing of the spirit of the age, to which, as Paul suggests, the wisdom of God stands in stark contrast.

Stories depicting a mother succumbing to the logos of violence directed at her own child are arguably the most tragic stories we humans know how to tell. The story of Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia or the story of Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter are deeply tragic, of course, but do they compare, really, with Euripides’ chilling account of Agave joining in the killing of her own son even as he implores her to recognize him? The reason that the spectacle of a mother’s love succumbing to the mood of the crowd and taking part in the death of her own child is even more wrenching than that of a father’s comparable blindness is, I suppose, that in our hearts we all know the mother’s love to be the last best hope for love in a loveless world, and the spectacle of its capitulation to lovelessness is deeply distressing. But it does happen.

In July of 2002 Time Magazine carried a story about a ritual human sacrifice in India, where gods and goddesses are sometimes appeased in the ancient way. In this story a family brutally “sacrificed” a 15-year-old daughter to the goddess Kali. Ritual scrupulosity was of course required. The father had to perform the sacrifice in strict accord with tradition, and the journalist captured the horror of his scrupulosity.

In ritual order, Karmakar wafted incense over her, tore off her blue skirt and pink T shirt, shaved her, sprinkled her with holy water from the Ganges and rubbed her with cooking

fat. Then chanting mantras to the “mother” goddess Kali, he sawed off Manju’s hands, breasts and left foot, placing the body parts in front of a photograph of a blood-soaked Kali idol. If the goddess were to grant Khudu Karmakar the awesome powers he expected from a virgin’s death, the victim had to be willing, had to know what was happening, watch the knife, and not stop it. But even tranquilizers couldn’t lull 15-year-old Manju Kumari to her fate. In his police confession, Karmakar says his wife, daughter and three accomplices had to gag Manju and pin her down on the earthen floor before the shrine.

According to the Time Magazine story, sacrifice and sorcery are making a comeback in India, where the typical goal of such rituals is material welfare of the sacrificers.

In January, in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, a 24-year-old woman hacked her three-year-old son to death after a tantric sorcerer supposedly promised unlimited earthly riches. ... Sociologist Ashis Nandy says: “You see your neighbor doing well, above his caste and position, and someone tells you to get a child and do a secret ritual and you can catch up.” Adds mysticism expert Ipsita Roy Chakaraverti: “It’s got nothing to do with real mysticism or with spiritualism. It comes down to pure and simple greed.”⁵¹

The most horrifying of these stories are those describing parents sacrificing their own children, and the grizzliest of all are those in which the mother takes part in the sacrifice of her children, as when 15-year-old Manju Kumari was held down by her mother and dismembered by her father, or when three children were hacked to death by their mother in a ritual attempt to secure “unlimited earthly riches.” These shocking things simply demonstrate that the safest place in the fallen world for love to survive an upsurge of lovelessness is still a fallen place, and it sometimes isn’t safe enough. Nor need we go to exotic foreign lands to find evidence of this.

Compare the rituals described in the Time Magazine story with one far removed, it seems at first, from the world in which people could allow such things to happen to the defenseless. It is a “procedure” that is described in icy detail in court testimony given in March of this year at the trials where the recently enacted Partial Birth Abortion Ban was being legally challenged. The following synopsis is far less gruesome than was the court testimony, though those with the stomach such things are welcome to see for themselves.⁵² As I say, a much more clinical summary is as follows:

- 1) Guided by ultrasound, the abortionist grabs the baby’s legs with forceps.
- 2) The baby’s leg is pulled out into the birth canal.

⁵¹ “Killing for ‘Mother’ Kali,” by Alex Perry Atapur, TIME Magazine — Asia edition, July 29, 2002, Vol. 160, number 3.

⁵² See: *National Abortion Federation, et. al. v. Ashcroft*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York; *Planned Parenthood v. Ash*, U.S. District Court, Northern District of California; *Leroy Carhart, M.D., et. al. v. Ashcroft*, U. S. District Court, District of Nebraska.

- 3) The abortionist delivers the baby's entire body, except for the head
- 4) The abortionist jams scissors into the baby's skull. The scissors are then opened to enlarge the skull.
- 5) The scissors are removed and a suction catheter is inserted. The child's brains are sucked out, causing the skull to collapse. The dead baby is then removed.⁵³

For decades, feminists have claimed that the world would be less violent if women were in charge. There very well might be a degree of truth in that claim, but only if women retain more of the feminine and especially maternal sensibilities than have those who fiercely object to the slightest constraint on procedures as shocking as those just described.

Resistant as it is to the myths that destroy the empathy for victims in others, the maternal bond is by no means invulnerable to the social contagions that accompany such violence and the myths that hallow its memory. As humanity's most trustworthy source of lucidity in times of social and spiritual confusion, however, it would be a grave mistake to regard with sanguinity evidence that this maternal bond is succumbing to an orchestrated effort of moral anesthesia. The widespread cultural acceptance of something as unnatural and as alien to healthy maternal sensibilities as abortion represents precisely this kind of evidence, made all the more bizarre by the fact that its most vocal advocates claim to be acting on behalf of the feminine principle.

In the 20th century, tyrants of various political stripes transformed their nations into social laboratories and conducted wildly utopian experiments, each of which turned in the end to madness and murder. Here in the 21st century, we are rushing forward with politically soft-core forms of social experimentation that are leading us toward cultural catastrophes fully as grim and savage as those of the 20th century, the only exception being that the victims are even more helpless, even more voiceless, even easier to ignore.

Added to the 40 million children who have been killed since abortion was legalized, there are untold millions of women (and men) who have come to regard this practice as morally acceptable. Now women who are encouraged by legal sanction and widespread social acceptance of abortion to regard the killing of the child in the womb as a morally acceptable "choice" are women whose maternal sensibilities are being violated and vulgarized, even if they have never had, and never even contemplated having, an abortion themselves. It is naïve to think that this widespread culturally induced numbing of maternal sensibilities would be socially, morally, or emotionally inconsequential, or that its consequences would be limited to abortion-

⁵³ http://www.campaignlifecoalition.com/abortion_types/index.html

related circumstances. It is simply irresponsible to ignore the incalculable damage that comes from the cultural legitimization of something as unnatural and as antithetical to maternal sensibilities as abortion. Moral narcosis has a price. Millions of babies have paid it, but it is exacting a subtle but very significant toll as well on the society that has chosen to look the other way and especially on the women of that society, whose noblest instincts and finest emotions are being anesthetized and calloused in the process.

Gil Bailie