Woman, wife, mother, Catholic and feminist

A contemporary American view

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I HAVE STOPPED ON Interstate 80, Iowa, one of the interminable stretches of highway that span the American Midwest, at a barn-shaped antique market, to stretch. Amid the potpourri of refurbished what-not cabinets, grandfather clocks and tin toys is a *Look* magazine, circa 1970. Its cover story, 'The mother myth', draws my attention. Inside is an article that looks today like a parody of women's-lib verbiage. Motherhood is bunk, it declares. Women don't need to have children to be fulfilled. There is no biological imperative to do so. Solemn official proclamations by psychologists and laboratory scientists deem the motherhood myth to be a ploy of the patriarchs, of chauvinist political and religious forces.

At my last rest break on Interstate 80, I had pulled up at a truck stop and, on a wire rack containing various pamphlets promoting health and happiness, found a copy of the modern family magazine published by 'Focus on the Family', a highly successful and influential family-promotion and education industry spearheaded by conservative radio psychologist Dr James Dobson.[1]

The magazine is a glossy compendium of firm, sensible sounding advice on child-rearing and home life. There are interviews exalting women who have turned away from 'selfishness' and returned from the workplace to stay home with their small children. Solemn studies report the deleterious effects of 'liberal' political and religious attitudes on the family. Everything, from teen pregnancy to homosexual behaviour to crime, is linked to the failure of Americans to return to the 'God-ordained' structure of the traditional family – the two-parent household headed by the father as spiritual and moral leader with wife and children faithfully fulfilling their parts as, respectively, 'submissive' and 'obedient' family members.

Caught in the cross-fire of the 'culture wars'

My casual perusal of the reading matter found along Interstate 80 leaves me baffled. As a Catholic woman of feminist principles who has worked and simultaneously raised three children, I wonder what has transpired in the USA in the years since the publication of the now dated *Look* article. In a society that gave birth to and continues to champion the women's movement, where do I find myself?

In fact, I find myself caught in the crossfire between polarized camps in the present North American socio-political-religious 'culture wars'.[2] I have been publicly castigated from both sides of the ideological spectrum, especially as I have spoken on the topic of family spirituality.[3] At one point an irate graduate student of mine, a father who had been the primary caregiver for his infant daughter while his wife worked, criticized me for not including the experiences of bottle-feeding parents in my reflections linking breast-feeding and the eucharist. And, at a workshop in which I, the presenter, was working a thousand miles away from home, an equally irate mother of five launched into a tirade about the selfishness of mothers who work outside the home.

My secular feminist colleagues at other universities, with whom I sit on committees, usually find my religious affiliation incomprehensible because they associate it with reactionary religious politics. Likewise, the mothers of my son's friends, with whom I sit on the benches at the soccer field, often look judgementally at the travel and professional responsibilities that take me away from home. To be a woman, a Catholic, a wife, a mother and a feminist in contemporary North American society in which some of the deepest cultural polarizations, buttressed by religious convictions, revolve around issues of womanhood and family life, is no easy task.

This article attempts, in an anecdotal fashion, to map some of the contemporary North American religious cultural terrain at the end of a decade in which, while woman and family have been the focus of international attention, the models for spiritual life of the woman in the family remain a jumble of contradictory messages.

Women and neighbourhood: family and diversity

Omaha, Nebraska

I am walking the dog in our neighbourhood, an older section of town adjacent to downtown, crowded with modest but roomy family homes built between World Wars I and II. At the end of our block

sits a rambling stucco house surrounded by a yard that seems always to be under construction. In the midst of the sometimes cinder-blocks, sometimes piles of lumber, an unflappable Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, in her blue plaster-of-Paris serenity, reigns supreme over a court of plastic flowers.

It is not often that I see the mother of this house outdoors for she is well occupied inside with her large and growing family – four, perhaps five, of the children are her blonde-haired, blue-eyed biological offspring. Others, including an African-American boy – a 'rescue' baby whose distraught young unwed mother was promised this home outside an abortion clinic – and a severely handicapped boy from Central America, have been folded into the family. All the children are home-schooled, having been pulled out of the neighbourhood parochial school the year before because it was too liberal. This school, which to my sensibilities is a throwback to the 1950s, with its rigid disciplines, May and October rosaries, compulsory religious education and mass attendance, was for my down the street neighbours, not 'Catholic' enough.[4]

On a recent visit to my chiropractor I happened to run into our neighbour. We both have fallen off the ends of the American political, social and religious spectrum, me from the left, she from the right, and find ourselves seated together in the waiting room of this alternative health care provider. She tells me that their African-American child had begun exhibiting some of the violent behaviour characteristic of babies whose mothers are crack-dependent. He is in treatment now at Boys' Town but they expect him home soon. It is all part of the sacred work this woman and her husband see themselves doing. Besides her schooling in the home, this busy mother is actively involved in pro-life, anti-abortion crusading, and couple-to-couple natural family planning counselling.[5]

Estes Park, Colorado

My husband and children and I have gathered at the mountain-top home of a peace-activist friend, a woman who describes herself as an Episcopalian/Quaker/Catholic who teaches conflict resolution at an interdenominational Protestant seminary. Our visit coincides with a monthly 'eucharistic' gathering of associates in her home. Tonight there is one other Catholic couple with their children, a disaffected lay man and his wife who are actively dis-promoting an upcoming papal visit to Colorado by organizing alternative gatherings to protest about Vatican declarations on women in the priesthood and birth

control. Another middle-aged childless couple, a former priest and nun both turned psychotherapists, join us as well. Our little congregation is fleshed out by two younger women of vague denominational affiliation who have a toddler in tow. As the evening unfolds it becomes clear that the baby is mothered by both of them and that they are a couple. Wanting a child, we learn, they each had been simultaneously artificially inseminated and one of them 'took'. Hence, their offspring, a curly-brown-haired girl who flashed shy smiles at the roomful of strangers.

Our hostess, being a grandmother, takes over the little girl. Her own are all grown now and she is single, having been left by two previous husbands. The first, when he 'came out of the closet' and decided to live in a manner more consonant with his gay identity; the second, when in mid-life he fell in love with another woman. She does not see her grandchildren that often for it is only her eldest son who has provided a new generation and he and his wife are born-again fundamentalist Christians. While our hostess retains cordial relations with his family, the subject of religion is never brought up between them, making typically family-time religious holidays difficult to negotiate.

Conflicting views of women: different readings of Scripture

America's 'culture wars' are swirling storms at whose centres are fiercely held views of women's natures and roles, including their roles in family. Although at first glance it might seem that the polarization is between traditional Christian and secular views, the storms are not so easily analysed. In fact, conflicting views of women, which run along a spectrum that is not adequately identified as conservative to liberal, all have roots in Christianity and its centuries-old struggle with the women's question.

The deep history of that question is too long to summarize here, but some insight might be gained by picking up the thread of the story in America in the nineteenth century. Although this analysis simplifies a complex history, it is safe to say that it was two radically different readings of Scripture that propelled proponents of both sides of the argument to proffer their opinions. And both had profound claims to make about the spirituality of women and about women and family life.

On the one hand, some Christian preachers extolled and gave biblical justification to what has been called the 'cult of true womanhood'. In this cluster of ideas, the ideal (white) woman occupied the

domestic sphere. She had been designed by God to reign over hearth and home. Her roles as wife and mother were prescribed by divine decree and were 'complementary' to those of her husband, whose proper work was done outside the home in the brutal competitive world of economic and intellectual struggle. Men were believed to be naturally endowed for their roles just as women were for their roles within the home. A woman's innate virtues of sensitivity, caring, moral purity and piety were to be employed in nurturing and spiritually uplifting her children and in providing a gentle haven for her spouse. Encouraged by biblical injunctions such as those found in the fifth chapter of Ephesians, the ideal woman was submissive to her husband, deferring to him as spiritual head of the household.

The 'cult of true womanhood' flourished first in white, Protestant North America but soon spread to the poor immigrant Catholic populations who often emulated their more affluent, culturally dominant Protestant employers.[6] It was a melding of classic Reformed thinking about women – both Luther and Calvin upheld marriage as a divinely instituted vocation for both sexes and saw, each in his own way, the wife's role as subordinate to the husband's – and of Victorian cultural ideals, spawned by the Industrial Revolution which divided the family into those who left the home to work and those who remained behind to focus on domesticity. My home-schooling neighbour is a direct descendant of this nineteenth-century tradition that sees the spiritual destiny of women linked to hearth and home. She shares her inheritance with scores of other conservative Christians across most American denominations who find divine direction in their clearly defined domestic roles.

On the other hand, other nineteenth-century Christian apologists argued that Scripture, as well as the lived implications of Scripture, called for a radical redefinition of womanhood in light of the gospel. Especially on the margins of the 'Radical Reformation' and its descendants one finds the idea that women are, first and foremost, disciples. They are recipients of the Spirit's life well before they are wives and mothers. Claims, based on Genesis 2, that women are by nature inferior and thus subordinate to men, struck these Christians as in opposition both to the witness of the gospel with its stories of women disciples and to the experience of women who felt themselves called to teach, preach and evangelize – and not within the confines of home. These radical Christians hotly contested any suggestion of female inferiority or subordination. The Quakers, for example, from their inception, had modelled equitable male–female

relationships. Women as well as men felt the call to travel as witnesses and the Quaker community would support and provide for women even when they had young children, in their following of the Spirit's prompting.[7]

Several of the women who gathered at the historic Seneca Falls meeting in 1848 and launched the modern women's movement were of Quaker background. Others of them, like Presbyterian Elizabeth Cady Stanton, editor of the *Women's Bible*, were likewise in the business of redefining Christian womanhood. They criticized the abuse of Scripture, pointed to the Genesis 1 narrative to affirm gender equivalence, and rejected the revelatory authority of biblical passages that demeaned or debased women. In the process, the tacit assumption of the 'cult of true womanhood', that women's spirituality was linked to child-rearing and homemaking, was challenged.

The women's movement born at Seneca Falls has taken many forms since then – the issues of women's suffrage, abolition, temperance and other types of social and moral reform all have been its focus. In most recent North American memory the Movement has veered sharply away from its religious roots and presented itself in frankly secular guise as the cause for 'women's rights'. The secular feminist agenda is hardly monolithic but it has concerned itself with issues of discrimination based on gender, with the liberation of women from constrictive and stereotypic roles, with violence against women and with women's reproductive rights. The 1970 issue of *Look* magazine is a relic of one particularly striking moment in this secular incarnation when women were seen as essentially and utterly divorced from the context of family life.

Religious feminism, which is active across traditions and denominations, has for its part concerned itself with women's full participation in the churches, the reform of gender-exclusive language, theology and practice and the recovery of women's voices from the tradition. In terms of family, most recent religious feminist attention has been generated around questions of inclusivity, with the recognition of a variety of non-traditional family structures and types – single-parent, blended, adoptive, as well as gay- and lesbian-headed households.

Thus the lesbian couple with their baby at the radically inclusive Colorado 'eucharistic' gathering in the Colorado mountains, like my home-schooling neighbour, are the descendants of a centuries-long Christian struggle to conceptualize and reconceptualize the nature and role of women and family.

Feminism as the new 'f-word'

Washington, DC

It is a brisk March morning in the nation's capital. I am in my hotel room following a consultation at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Feminism and the Church organized by the Secretariat for Women, Laity, and Family and Youth. It has been a cordial but tense meeting. Lining the table were representatives from all segments of the Catholic community who might have something to say about feminism and its relationship to Catholic pastoral practice, theology and family life. There are progressive women religious in professional apparel (according to a recent study, the women in America most well-educated and conversant with feminist principles), who argue forcefully that the Christian feminist agenda which critiques all relationships of domination and subordination as opposed to the radical egalitarianism preached in the gospel, must be incorporated into all aspects of the Church's practice and teaching. There are their more traditional counterparts in full religious habit, women comfortable with the idea that the Church and its ministers are the authentic expression of God's will and uncomfortable at what they see as the disobedience of their progressive sisters. There are liberals who teach on theological faculties and conservatives who serve as canon lawyers. There are representatives from the deeply traditional League of Catholic Women, from Hispanic women's groups and from pro-life advocacy organizations. There are philosophers who quote the pope and argue for an innate complementarity of male and female that defines the roles of each sex, and feminist thinkers who turn the complementarity argument around and promote the official elevation of Mary, the Mother of God to near divine status so that gender equivalence may be realized within the symbolism of the Godhead.[8]

I am tired. My presentation on feminism and the Catholic family has supported the idea that the most hallowed teachings from our spiritual heritage about the intrinsic freedom of the children of God and the primacy of spiritual maturity and conscience support a view of family life that is consonant with classic feminist principles.[9] Relationships of domination and subordination – husband dominating over wife, men dominating women, parents exercising power over their children to keep them always subordinate rather than gradually to empower them – these cannot facilitate the deep and radical spiritual maturity to which we are ultimately called.

In the anteroom of the hotel room my two youngest children, whom I have treated to a trip to the nation's capital, are idly flipping through magazines. My thirteen-year-old daughter is engrossed in one of the teen magazines that dominate the news-stands. Articles on fashion with wraith-like models are interspersed with lingerie ads for undergarments that enhance cleavage. In fact, cleavage is everywhere one looks on the news-stand today. I muse ironically: 'My generation burned our bras. And now our daughters have discovered the "Wonder Bra"!'

Santiago, Dominican Republic

I am grading the papers of several of my undergraduate students who are enrolled in a course entitled 'Women in the Christian Tradition'. We are here together on a semester-abroad programme sponsored by the university in which I teach. They have been made uncomfortable in yesterday's class by an enactment of a contemporary religious ritual designed by a woman liturgist sensitive to 'women's voices'. It was an awfully tame ritual by my standards, a poetic meditation with plenty of shared prayer and song, on the Lucan text of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. It was interspersed with evocations of notable biblical women and some questioning of the gospel writer's depiction of this 'women's event' (after all, what woman would visit her pregnant cousin and go home *before* the birth?). My students were worried by the rewriting of the sacred text and by the feminine metaphors evoked in religious ritual. It seemed shocking and vaguely irreverent to them. These are the conscientious young women, most Catholics, a few Protestants, who will become the elementary teachers, dental hygienists, occupational therapists, sales managers, and counsellors of tomorrow. They are sceptical about feminism.

It is the new 'f-word' on campus back home. Feminists are to them not the idealistic women religious seeking a world transformed in which the marginalized and oppressed, including women, are freed from the patriarchal structures which keep them powerless. Feminists are odd and unattractive women, man-haters, whose stridency offends and the political motive of whose agenda is lost to living memory. Yet my students take for granted as a 'state of nature' the gains for women for which their foremothers so 'stridently' fought (and continue to fight): the vote, property rights, educational opportunities, career options, equitable wages. They also assume they will 'have it all': the freedom to choose meaningful

and individually satisfying work and the freedom to raise families, although they won't do it in the same way as their frantic stretched-beyond-belief mothers.

Differences between the generations

No doubt the vitality of each generation is fuelled by the assumption that the world will be transformed by its own solutions. The generation that produced the great liberation theologies, including feminist theology, is being replaced by a generation that has reaped the benefits and inherited the failures of its predecessors.

If one were to consult the library catalogue of any major American university, one would find that feminist theory has had a profound impact on every traditional discipline. The same is true of mainstream Christian theology. The world of academic theology has undergone a revolution. Feminist theory and women's concerns are everywhere in evidence: in liturgical studies, biblical scholarship, systematics, ethics and pastoral care. We have developed a hermeneutics of suspicion, recovered women's stories, reconceptualized doctrine, framed new ethical categories and critiqued the way in which we minister to one another. Yet in the Christian world at large, these contributions are either fiercely rejected or have yet to permeate collective religious consciousness. They certainly remain on the margins of awareness for many young women.[10]

This is especially true when it comes to the question of family life. American Christians still struggle with the question, 'What is a family?'[11] Does our commitment compel us to conform to the patriarchal pattern? Is the Religious Right's nostalgia for the 'traditional' family really a search for a golden age that never existed?[12] Does Christian faith compel us to take the gospel message of radical inclusion, highlighted in liberation theology in all its forms, seriously in family life? And we struggle with the question, 'What is the spiritual call of women in families?' The raising of children? The cultivation of a successful marital relationship? The discovery of one's own gifts that can nurture the community and world? Reform of the Church so that it might be more responsive to women's concerns? What about earning a livelihood and providing for the next generation? Where does this fit with a call?

Church and the truly Christian family

What I find myself aching for in the midst of the noise of competing claims about the truly Christian family, is a little less focus on

the question of family structure (although this is a central question). The two-parent, stay-at-home mom *versus* the blended *versus* the single-parent *versus* the gay couple *versus* the two-career-couple family wars are wearing. Especially I find myself aching for a compassionate and prophetic articulation of a women's spirituality that can honour women both as deeply defined by those they care for and yet radically open to the Spirit as it moves uniquely and creatively in and among us.

Structural reform needs to take place. The socio-economic system in North America today militates against creative experiments in childcare, job-sharing, family-leave policies or other arrangements that could enhance family life. Certainly it is the work of the churches to support such reforms. But along with this I think it is also the work of the churches to rekindle our imaginations about the dynamic life of the Spirit that can animate women in families to develop and share their gifts, both within their families and beyond.

The thoroughly secularized feminist movement provides us with an impoverished vision. The issue is not the debunking of the 'mother-myth' or simply allowing women equal employment opportunity. The issue is, opportunity for what? To amass a fortune? Achieve self-fulfilment? Provide for a family? Receive equal compensation for like work? Or opportunity and courage to harken to the Spirit's prompting?

That prompting is both particular and communal. A woman with a family is not merely a part of a family system. But neither is she an isolated figure, shorn of responsibilities and affective ties. She is both. The life that a woman shares with her family requires that she be responsive to the Spirit as it emerges in the needs of those for whom she cares as well as responsive to the freedom of that Spirit to speak in radical and ever new ways. Over the life cycle, a woman's relationship to things familial will change. Her responsiveness must include an awareness of that as well.

I ache to have us, as Church, genuinely engage in spiritual conversation, to enlarge our notion of spirituality beyond the personal realm and to reimagine ourselves as people whose deepest calling is to become, together and individually, transparent to God. I ache to have us ask each other, 'How is the complex discernment of family life carried out? What does it mean to engage in layered listening, harkening to the Spirit's whisper at all levels – personal, familial, local, global? How do we honour women as caregivers and workers,

as world citizens and intimate vessels that carry life, as archetypal in their roles as mothers and as uniquely endowed individuals?'

I am weary of culture wars, of the 'if only' and 'if it were done our way'. I yearn for us, as discerning people, to remember that the ancient spiritual art is not so much about final solutions or definitive answers to our problems as about our compassionate and intrepid ability to live adventurously into the mystery of the hidden ground of love that sustains us. Perhaps, from that perspective, the varying ways we interpret the call from God would not so much be a barrier to our unity as a numinous adventure in which we all share.

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NOTES

1 Dobson was recently deemed, by the *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, the 'Godzilla of the Right' for strong-arm tactics levelled at conservative politicians to accept his ideological purity about things familial or risk losing the endorsement of his five million customers. The column was reprinted in the *Omaha World Herald*, Thursday, 21 May 1998.

2 A number of recent publications have documented these wars. Among those that speak to them from the perspective of religion are Tom Sine, *Cease fire: searching for sanity in America's culture wars* (Grand Rapids MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995) and John Green et al., *Religion and the culture wars: dispatches for the front* (Lanham MD; Powman and Littlefield, 1996).

3 My book, *Sacred dwelling: a spirituality of family life*, 2nd edn (Leavenworth KS: Forest of Peace Publishing, 1994), explores the spiritual dynamics of family life but does not primarily address the question of women's spirituality, although much of what I treat is refracted through my own experience and hence takes one woman's perspective.

4 An enlightening article on the religious character of the current home-schooling movement by Colleen McDannell is found in David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (eds), *American sacred space* (Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp 187–219.

5 Of all the women on our block who have children the home-schooling mom and one other exception – the wife of a local African-American pastor – are the only women not employed outside the home. Our modest middle-class neighbourhood does not have many 'professional' or 'career' women. Our local working moms are employed as bank tellers, insurance claims clerks, clerical support staff at the state university, receptionists and such. Most have worked, at least part time, while their children were young. One neighbour exemplifies the lot – family finances made it possible for her to stay at home for the first several years of her second and

fourth child's life. She worked outside the home during the infancies of her first and third as a word-processor for a local corporation.

These are women who define themselves primarily as mothers and wives. 'Soccer moms', they are the generation of women now raising young children who were so crucial in the latest US elections. The tag of the 'baby boomers' or the crest of the wave of 'Generation X', they are the women whose conversations at a neighbourhood baby shower revolve around tales of floor refurbishing, curtain fabrics and carpool horror stories, and who have produced an average of 2.8 children (significantly higher than the national average of 1.86, for this is a particularly Catholic town).

6 The Cult of True Womanhood is documented in a number of places. A helpful summary is found in Barbara J. McAffie, *Her story: women in Christian tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). On the Roman side of the spectrum see Colleen McDannell, 'Catholic domesticity, 1890–1960' in Karen Kennelly CSJ (ed), *American Catholic women: a historical exploration* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1989), pp 48–80.

7 Cf Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press).

8 The participants in the consultation reflect two basic approaches to ecclesiology that are operative in Catholicism in North America today. One, a juridical model that sees the Church as an ordered society ruled by leaders ordained to their duty, and a second communal model that sees the Church as a community of mutuality and shared responsibility rooted in baptism. The two polar views of women in family parallel these ecclesiologies. Pope John Paul II has made something of an attempt to soften a rigid model of domination and subordination, calling for the 'mutual surrender' of husband and wife in the marriage relationship. Yet his views of 'complementarity' continue to uphold a definition of women primarily as mothers and spouses and, while he is appreciative of the variety of gifts that women bring to the human community, he does not emphasize the co-humanity of women and men but rather their differences, which he sees as complementing each other. This view underlies his exclusion of women from the priesthood solely on the grounds that they are women (i.e. they cannot 'image' the maleness of Jesus). Cf John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortations *Familiaris consortio* and *Mulieris dignitatem.*

9 The paper referred to is as yet unpublished but I make reference to the same issues in 'Searching for God's will together' in *The exercise of the papacy: continuing the dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp 89–106.

10 A huge furore arose several years ago because of an interdenominational women's conference to which many churches had sent representatives. The 'milk and honey' imagery of the liturgy and the recasting of credal and liturgical formulas to be more gender-inclusive and reflective of women's concerns nearly split denominations in half. This in the same decade that the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination, publicly affirmed that women should 'submit graciously to their husband's leadership', citing Ephesians 5:22–33 as requiring this submission.

11 The public debate, reflected in the churches, tends to pit the 'traditional nuclear' family against 'new' (and 'aberrant') families. The terminology is not very helpful for what is often considered normative may never have been so. See Stephanie Coontz, *The way we never were: Americans and the nostalgia trap* (Basic Books, 1992). An interesting and helpful distinction between the 'modern' or 'traditional' family and the 'nuclear' family is made by Don Browning, of the Lilly-funded Religion, Family and Culture Project. The modern or traditional family, he argues, is the icon of conservative Christian ideology. It sees the two-parent clearly gender-roled family with stay-at-home mother and provider-spiritual-leader-father both fulfilling God-ordained roles. This family has its roots in the Cult of True Womanhood which upheld the domestic role of women as divinely endowed. Browning distinguishes this from the 'nuclear' family, the non-patriarchal two-parent family focused on the raising of children but sharing equally the economic and child-rearing house-care responsibilities. This for Browning is a more appropriate and viable model for contemporary Christians. While he recognizes that other configurations of family are prevalent today and must be ministered to

and included in the Church, he relies on sociological studies to affirm that, for the task of child-rearing, a two-parent unit is best equipped to complete that task successfully. He also wants to confine the term 'family' to communities of child-bearing and rearing and finds the use of the term to apply to other communities, including adult union and the Church, to be confusing. See Don S. Browning, 'The Religion, Culture and Family Project: an interim report' in *Criterion* 5–11. While I am appreciative of the distinction he makes, I am also appreciative of claims of viability made by those promoting differing family forms.

12 See Coontz, *The way we never were.*